MRS MANNING'S WARDS

by

May Baldwin

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Mrs Manning's Wards

By

MAY BALDWIN

Author of

'A Ripping Girl,' 'Moll Meredyth—Madcap,' &c.

WITH SIX ILLUSTRATIONS

by

Gordon Browne

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

[Transcriber Note: Frontispiece is missing from the original source book.]

MRS MANNING'S WARDS.

CHAPTER I.

THE NEW ARRIVALS.

'EDWARD, do you hear what I say?' cried a bright, handsome woman to the other occupant of the hall lounge, a clergyman of middle age with a quiet, reserved air.

He was reading the *Saturday Review*, but he laid it on his knees as his wife spoke. 'I? Eh? I beg your pardon, my dear; did you speak to me?' he said, bringing his mind from the *Review* with evident difficulty to listen to the gossip which he shrewdly guessed that his wife was aching to impart to him.

'To be sure I spoke to you. Do wake up, Edward! I have some news for you,' she replied.

'News, or do you mean gossip?' he observed with an attempt at a mild reproof.

'Whichever it is, it has wakened up all Bowcester'—(which, it may be mentioned in parenthesis, is pronounced Bow'ster)—'and it won't do for you, its Rector, to be the only man asleep and ignorant of it,' retorted his energetic wife.

There were moments when the Rev. Edward Karslake wished that his wife were less 'awake' to tittle-tattle, and this was one of them. However, as he knew that he should have no peace until she had imparted this last piece of gossip to him (which, as usual, he listened to in the hope of contradicting it if uncharitable, or at least of putting a more charitable construction upon it than his impulsive wife always did), he resigned himself to listen with what interest he could muster. He only hoped it was not another scandal.

'Well, my dear, what is it?' he inquired.

'Mrs Manning has been appointed guardian of two children. Did you ever hear of such a thing?' she demanded in tones of amazement.

'Dear me! I think you must be mistaken, Christine. Mrs Manning is not a guardian; at least nothing was said about it at our last meeting, and she is the

last person we should elect,' objected the clergyman.

'So I should think,' put in his wife.

'Not that I know anything against her,' he said hastily; 'but she does not take an interest in children or'——

'Anybody,' his wife finished up for him as he hesitated for a word which would not be too unamiable, about which she had no such scruples.

'I would not go so far as to say that, Christine. She is a very reserved woman. I fancy she has had a great deal of trouble, and it has made her shun people,' he remarked. 'But I feel sure you are wrong about the guardianship.'

'It's not that kind of guardianship; it's worse still. She has been appointed guardian of a cousin's two children. I did not even know she had a cousin,' said Mrs Karslake, as if this were a personal grievance.

'Probably her cousin knew her better than we, and I am sure she will be just, and look after their interests,' replied her husband, and he took up his *Review*, trusting that he would be allowed to read it in peace.

But his hopes were vain.

'But what a house for children to come to!—so dull. And what a person to replace a mother!' Mrs Karslake cried.

'She won't have them there, you may depend upon it,' he said with decision, and again began the *Review*.

'But that's the news which has wakened up all Bowcester. I don't know when I have been at such a lively At Home. Everybody was talking about it. The children are expected to arrive to-morrow, poor little things!' ejaculated his wife.

This time she had not to complain of her husband's want of interest, for he put down his paper, and looked with disturbed countenance at her. 'Dear me! you don't say so?' he muttered feebly.

'I do say so, unfortunately, because it is true. But I really think the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children ought to step in and prevent it. We were all saying so at the At Home,' she cried.

'I hope, Christine,' said her husband, looking serious, 'that you have not been saying any such thing. It would be libellous, and quite unjustifiable. We know nothing against Mrs Manning except unkind gossip.'

‘We know that her last maid left because she had not enough to eat,’ said his wife.

‘We know that she said so. But we also know of a maid who left this house because her mistress was too severe,’ he remarked dryly.

‘Oh, you mean that naughty Mary, who would wear a fringe and impossible skirts,’ said she.

‘That was not the tale she told; and if we are to go by servants’ tales, who would have any character left?’ argued her husband.

‘Oh, well, if you are satisfied, it is more than any one else is,’ said his wife, getting up to go to her room and take off her outdoor clothes.

If she had but known it, her husband was as disturbed at the news as she herself, and sat there, the neglected *Review* on his knees, while he gazed with knitted brows out of the window, from which, as it happened, the house of the aforesaid Mrs Manning could be seen.

‘Poor things! Poor little things!’ he murmured, and a heavy sigh broke from him. He was thinking of the strange ways of Providence, which took from him and his wife children whom they would have loved so tenderly had the dear ones lived, and gave to this forbidding-looking woman children whose parents had been taken from them.

As, however, he was very much afraid of his wife’s outspoken tongue, he said nothing more about Mrs Manning’s wards, though he made a mental resolution to call on her as soon as possible, unfriendly though she was, and see the children himself, who he hoped would have a kind nurse at all events.

‘I suppose you have no objection to my going to meet them, Edward?’ remarked Mrs Karslake abruptly that evening, apropos of nothing.

Mr Karslake looked up in bewilderment. ‘Meet whom, Christine?’ Then, as a light dawned on him, he added, ‘Do you mean Mrs Manning’s wards? You can’t do that. On what pretext would you do such a thing?’ he demanded.

‘I should do it on the pretext of getting a book from Smith’s bookstall just as the train was due,’ she retorted.

The Rector could not help laughing. ‘You had better not interfere in your neighbours’ business. Let us hope Mrs Manning has a love for children hidden away somewhere,’ he replied.

‘It is very much hidden, then. But, Ted, let me go and just say “How do you do?” to that boy and girl, so that they may know that they have a friend near. I cannot bear to think of any children not having a mother’s love,’ she begged.

A quiver in the usually brisk voice made her husband give way.

‘Be careful not to offend Mrs Manning then, or you will prevent our being any use to them. How old are they, do you know?’ he inquired.

‘I don’t know; but they are old enough to go to school, because the boy has been entered at the Grammar School, and I understand his sister is to go to the High School,’ she replied more cheerfully.

‘Will you be able to come to the workhouse with me to-morrow?’ he asked before they went to bed.

‘I am not sure; it depends upon what train the children arrive by,’ she explained.

‘Don’t you know? Then how can you go and meet them?’ he asked with eyebrows uplifted.

‘You will see,’ she said, nodding her head at him. And the Rector was fain to let her take her own way, which he devoutly hoped would not be one that would annoy their surly neighbour.

Next morning Mrs Karslake spent very idly, as it seemed to her husband, in the hall lounge near the window, sitting there doing nothing, till she suddenly started up and ran upstairs. He looked up surprised; but his eye happened to catch sight of a tall, angular figure in black which came out of the house opposite, and turned towards the station. Then he guessed, and against his better judgment he found himself hoping that his wife would be in time to give one of her cheery smiles to the orphaned boy and girl who were coming to such a dreary home and so unlovable a guardianship.

Mrs Karslake was down again in a minute, and her husband thought with pride that she looked as young and handsome with that bright colour in her cheeks as she had done the day he had married her ten years ago.

‘I should think that was a record,’ she cried gaily, alluding to her hasty toilet, as she went off with a nod to her husband.

Mr Karslake almost wished he had an excuse for going to meet the orphans too; but as he had not, he betook himself to his study and the preparation for the next Sunday’s sermon. He looked down at his text, and gave a start. It had been chosen at the beginning of the week, without

reference to the two children who were to arrive that day; but it ran: 'When my father and my mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.'

He wrote fast, but he had never written better; and when the sermon was finished he had no difficulty in committing it to memory, for he had spoken from his heart, and he thought he could almost give it extempore, a thing his nervousness always prevented him from doing.

He was putting his sermon away when his wife returned, walking fast up the garden path, and, with consternation, he saw that her eyes were full of tears.

'Christine, what is it, dear?' he asked anxiously.

'Oh Ted, this world is hard and difficult to understand!' she cried as she sank into a seat.

He took another close to her, and pressing her hand, said, 'Tell me all about it, my dear.'

She dashed the tears away. 'I *am* so glad I went—horrid woman!' she cried.

'You have not said anything to her, I hope?' he asked, alarmed.

'I said a good deal, but nothing offensive, so don't be afraid. On the contrary, I was most diplomatic. I caught Mrs Manning up half-way to the station.'

'Then you must have run,' put in the Rector.

She laughed. 'I nearly did, and said, "Good-morning," and, for a wonder, she did not snap my head off, but said it was not a good morning for her, because she had two tiresome visitors to meet.'

'Dear, dear! did she really?' said Mr Karslake, looking vexed.

'So, of course, I asked her about them, and condoled with her on the trouble she was having, and offered to help, if I could, by having them here; which seemed to please her, for she accepted the offer.'

The Rector looked relieved. 'Oh, come, it's not so bad, then, after all,' he said.

His wife took no notice of the interruption, but continued: 'So we went to the station together, and, after I had bought my book, I boldly waited to be introduced to the children. And—thank God I did!' she said with a change of tone from animated to solemn which quite startled her husband.

'Why? What happened, Christine?' he asked.

'They got out of the train, two forlorn figures in black. The boy is thirteen, so she said, and his sister a year older; and that heartless woman went up to them and said, "You are Cuthbert and Jessica Standish, I suppose?" They looked up at her in surprise, and both of them flushed up as they said, "Yes," hesitating. "Come along, then, and find your luggage," she replied.'

'Nonsense! She shook hands and kissed the girl, surely?' protested her husband.

'Not she. She kept her hands by her side, and was going off to the luggage-van, when I went forward. "You have not introduced me to your young wards, Mrs Manning," I said; and as I saw she was only going to say something nasty, I went on quickly: "I am Mrs Karslake, and we are your nearest neighbours. You will live opposite the Rectory, and I hope you will come and see us, and eat strawberries and cream as long as the fruit lasts." '

Mr Karslake gave a sigh of relief. 'I'm glad you said that, dear,' he said, smiling at her.

'You would have been glad if you had seen their faces. I could see they had much ado to keep from crying; at least the girl had. The boy's mouth was set, and I'm inclined to think that Mrs Manning won't have a very easy time of it with him,' said Mrs Karslake, and her husband noticed a tone of satisfaction in her voice.

'You must not encourage him to rebel, Christine,' he said in a grave tone of warning.

'I'm not quite so bad as that,' she protested. 'Besides, it would only make it worse for him, poor little fellow! Such a bright, bonny boy, Ted,' she added, her voice shaking.

Her husband looked kindly at her. He knew she was thinking of the baby boy who lived only a few days, like his two baby sisters.

'I must go and see them,' murmured he.

'You need not do that. They are coming to eat strawberries and cream this afternoon,' she remarked.

Her husband laughed. 'Well, really, Christine, I think you are exaggerating Mrs Manning's harshness. She evidently wishes them to have pleasure,' he said.

‘Does she?’ retorted his wife sarcastically. ‘Not she; but she is parsimonious, and begrudges them their food, and so is glad to let them go out for tea.’

‘You are not charitable, and I think your feelings are making you unjust. What difference can tea make? I believe that under that harsh exterior there is a warm heart,’ he argued.

‘About as warm as an iceberg! But we must try to make up for it. I can assure you, Ted, my heart ached when I shook hands with those two children at Mrs Manning’s gate, and I had much trouble to prevent myself from hugging them both,’ cried his wife.

‘I do not expect the boy would have thanked you. Boys of thirteen are not fond of being kissed by women. But you have not told me what the girl is like. Is she nice too?’ he asked.

‘Yes, very good-looking, with clean-cut features. But she is very shy. She looked frightened when she got to the door, and as if she were going to cry,’ replied the wife.

‘How did you manage to walk home with them? I thought I saw the bus drive up with luggage, and some people get out,’ remarked Mr Karslake.

‘Who is gossiping now? Oh, don’t excuse yourself. I knew you were anxious about those children, though you would not own it. Mrs Manning went home with the luggage, and the children walked with me to save the extra sixpence each, and I tried to cheer them up. Poor children! their mother died when they were quite small, and their father a month ago, they told me. That is to say, the boy told me so. But I should think the father must have forgotten what Mrs Manning was like, or he would never have left those children in her care.’

‘She must mean to do her duty by them, or why should she take them into her house, where they must be a great responsibility and give her trouble?’ urged her husband, who seemed to be trying to think well of his parishioner in spite of appearances being against her.

‘I know you will only say I am uncharitable again, but my belief is that she is a miser, and that those children are well-off, and that is why she has taken them to live with her; so I am going to keep my eye upon her. They were well dressed, and looked as if they had been well cared for,’ declared his wife.

Her husband said nothing. He knew more than he chose to say of Mrs Manning’s reported meannesses, but it would not have helped matters to

speak of them.

CHAPTER II.

BOWCESTER RECTORY.

EVERY now and then during lunch the Rector of Bowcester looked with his calm, grave eyes across the table at his vivacious wife, who, he could see, was very restless.

At last she caught the glance, and, with a smile half-defiant, said, 'Yes, what do you say?'

'I have said nothing,' was his reply.

'Not with your tongue, but you have been talking at me all lunch with those speaking eyes of yours, and you may as well say it and have done with it,' she retorted.

'I don't know that I have anything to say. I was thinking to myself that we shall have to be careful with those children, and not let this house be a receptacle for complaints against their hostess,' he remarked doubtfully, because he knew that a warning had sometimes a contrary effect upon his wife.

'I guessed it was something of that sort! But if you mean that I am to snub that boy, or the girl either, if they come to me with their troubles, I am afraid I shall not be careful, as you put it,' she replied.

For a moment Mr Karslake thought of abandoning his weekly visit to the workhouse, but he knew that it was looked forward to with so much pleasure by the old people there that he decided to trust to his wife's good feeling, and at a quarter to three took up his hat and stick to go.

'You will be back to tea, I suppose?' said his wife.

'I don't know. I hope so, but don't wait for me. I generally stay in the infirmary till half-past four,' he replied.

'Oh, then, I will keep the children till five o'clock. I told them to come at three,' she observed.

The church clock was striking three as two young figures walked out of the big iron gates of The Acacias, as Mrs Manning's gray stone house was called. They walked very soberly, and it was not until they looked up and caught sight of Mrs Karslake's handsome, smiling face that they brightened, the boy raising his hat with an answering smile, while the girl bowed her head gravely.

'I shall like the boy best; he is more responsive,' was Mrs Karslake's mental decision as she went to the front-door to welcome her guests.

The Rectory of Bowcester was perhaps the most popular house in the town, and probably one of its attractions was this habit of the Rector and (more especially) his wife of sitting in the hall lounge and opening the door to their visitors. 'One felt at home at once,' their parishioners said; and Mrs Karslake's wide sympathies made people forgive her occasional imprudent outspokenness.

The brother and sister, in their heavy mourning, looked almost out of place in the brightly upholstered square hall, with its Bird-of-Paradise chintz, its pale-green walls, and its stands full of flowering and sweet-smelling plants; but they were not allowed time to feel so.

'Come in and rest a little, and then we will go and gather our own strawberries for tea—unless you would rather eat them as you go along,' the Rector's wife said, as she drew forward two comfortable lounge-chairs.

'I'd rather do both,' announced the boy frankly, and laughed.

'Oh Bertie!' cried his sister in shocked accents, and she glanced, half-frightened, at Mrs Karslake.

The latter laughed merrily. 'To tell you the truth, that's what I do myself! I generally pick the strawberries myself for our tea, and I go armed with a large cabbage-leaf; but when I get there I always eat so many that I have no appetite left for them at tea—which is just as well, for my cabbage-leaf is never very full.'

'I'm going to have an appetite for the cream,' remarked Cuthbert Standish; and again his sister interposed anxiously.

'Cuthbert isn't greedy really, and he does not really mean that; only we have not had any strawberries this year, and travelling makes one—have an appetite,' she said.

'Then, if you are rested, let us go into the garden. We may find some raspberries; and it is as cool there under the trees as here, so we can retire to

the shade to eat our fruit and have tea as soon as you are ready,' said Mrs Karslake.

'Oh, we are not in a hurry; it is only three o'clock,' protested Jessica.

This time the boy made no remark, and the two followed their hostess into a delightful old walled-in garden, where, as it seemed to her visitors, every kind of fruit grew.

'This is like The Grange, Jess!' exclaimed the boy, looking round.

'Yes,' she agreed.

'Was The Grange the name of your old home?' inquired Mrs Karslake.

'Oh no; The Grange was the hall in our village,' said the boy.

'What part of England was that in?' inquired she again.

'In the north,' replied Jessica very politely; but somehow Mrs Karslake felt that she had been rebuffed. She was not inquisitive by nature, but she took a human interest in her neighbours, and, to do her justice, she only asked the questions to show her friendliness to the two orphans, and to gain their confidence. However, as they, or the girl at least, did not seem inclined to give it, she remarked, 'And now you have come to live in the south, I hope you will be very happy in time; and, at any rate, you have two friends already, for my husband is every one's friend, and I hope you will make his acquaintance this afternoon. He was obliged to go out, but will be back before you go.'

'Then we have three friends, because we have Mrs Manning, you know,' remarked Jessica.

The boy gave his sister a glance, but said nothing, and strolled on with his hands in his pockets.

Mrs Karslake was so taken aback that she did not know what to say, but bethought herself in time, and observed, 'Oh yes, of course; but she is your cousin, and a relative is not a friend exactly.'

'Our cousin!' exclaimed both children; and the girl added quickly, 'Oh no, she is no relation at all; only a friend.'

'I beg your pardon; I must have been mistaken,' Mrs Karslake said, and was glad that they had arrived at the strawberry-bed, which gave another turn to the conversation.

It required an effort on Mrs Karslake's part not to be absent-minded and ponder over this piece of information. She wondered how the report that they were the children of Mrs Manning's cousin got about. At the At Home the day before it was stated, and accepted as a fact; and if they were not Mrs Manning's cousins, what had induced her to upset all the routine of her house to take two strange children? For they certainly were not known to her personally, seeing that Mrs Manning had not once been away from Bowcester for a day since she came there, a widow, just fourteen years ago. She must have been a young woman then, not more than thirty at most; but it seemed to Bowcester that she had looked almost as old then as she did now, and every bit as cold and forbidding.

Jessica seemed to feel that she had perhaps been a little ungrateful for Mrs Karslake's kindness, for she drew near her as they were picking strawberries, and said, 'It is so very kind of you to give us this pleasure, especially the first day, when we are feeling a little strange in a new place.'

'Not at all; it is giving myself pleasure too, because I am very fond of children,' replied Mrs Karslake, smiling.

'Where are your children? Are they asleep?' cried Cuthbert. He had not quite heard what Mrs Karslake had said, and was more interested in the strawberries than the conversation, though his hostess noticed that he did not eat many, and that his cabbage-leaf was as full as his sister's.

'Yes, they are all asleep,' she replied quietly.

Jessica had not liked to ask the question. The house and garden did not look as if children ran about there, and there were none of the usual signs of their presence in the shape of broken toys or a rocking-horse or a swing, and she looked anxiously at Mrs Karslake when her brother asked his careless question.

A spasm of pain passed over their hostess's expressive face, though she bent over the strawberry-bed to hide it as she made her quiet answer; and Jessica Standish, who had known what trouble was, guessed the truth. Before her brother had time to make any more unfortunate remarks she said quickly, 'We shall never forget this afternoon, because it is the first happy afternoon we have had for such a long time;' and she sighed.

'Come here, Jess. Here are such big pointed beauties, I think they must be another kind,' put in her brother, who fought shy of sad topics.

They spent some time in the garden; and then the maid, who wore no 'fringe or impossible skirt,' brought out the tea, and set it out on a large

rustic table under the big elm on the lawn, and Mrs Karslake said, 'We won't wait for my husband, because when those old people in the infirmary get hold of him they don't let him go until he has heard of every ache and pain, and every trouble, real and imaginary, that they have.'

The three accordingly drew up their chairs to the table, where a substantial tea was laid out. It did flash across Jessica's mind that there were an unusual number of dainties for afternoon tea, and, if the truth be known, she suspected Mrs Karslake of being rather fond of good things when she said, 'I think four o'clock tea is such a nice meal in summer. It is not so warm then, and in the middle of the day it is too hot to eat properly, so I generally have sandwiches.'

This was quite true; but the sandwiches were generally cress or tomato sandwiches, not ham and beef; nor were they usually of the size and thickness they were to-day, when the cook, without any detailed directions, had carried out her mistress's instructions to 'make a nice tea for two growing children,' as meaning a substantial tea. 'For it's little enough they'll have had for dinner if what we hear is true,' observed cook, as she added some sausage-rolls to her other dishes, saying, 'Boys is always fond of sausage-rolls;' and her satisfaction was great when she found they had been finished.

'Every man-jack of them, cook; and though the young lady said, "No, thank you; I'm not really hungry," she ate almost as much as he and the mistress,' the parlour-maid assured her, she having apparently taken notes as she busied herself with the spirit-lamp, which would not work.

'The mistress, she never takes much afternoon tea, without it's a fairy-cake or a bit of bread and butter,' remarked cook.

'She did to-day, to keep them company, I suppose, and I doubt if she'll be able to eat any dinner. She've got a heart, the mistress have; that's what I always say,' declared the parlour-maid.

The two Standishes went home at five o'clock, after a game of croquet, and Jessica said to her brother, 'Cuthbert, pray don't speak about her children again to Mrs Karslake.'

'Why not? By the way, we never saw them! Why, what's up with them?' he demanded, seeing his sister's face.

'They are dead, I am sure,' she replied in a low tone.

'Dead!' he echoed, looking grave. 'But she said they were asleep,' he added.

‘She said that so as not to upset you, but I knew what she meant. I saw her face, and I was so sorry for her,’ said Jessica.

‘How rotten!’ was Cuthbert’s comment upon this.

‘So sorry I could not get home in time, Christine; those old women were full of trials and troubles. I suppose the children have gone?’ said the Rector, sinking into a chair with an air of fatigue.

‘Yes, they have only just gone. We enjoyed ourselves very much, and they had a good tea,’ she said with satisfaction.

‘Any left for me?’ he asked pleasantly.

‘Jane is bringing some fresh tea, and you can see that there are cakes galore if you use your eyes,’ she replied.

‘Samples of cakes,’ he remarked with a smile as he saw about half-a-dozen dishes with a few on each. ‘I hope you have not made them ill.’

‘It will be cook’s fault if they are. She took it upon herself to send up ham and beef sandwiches and sausage-rolls,’ remarked his wife, laughing.

‘My dear, I thought they were coming for strawberries and cream,’ remonstrated her husband as he took his tea.

‘They had them too. That was my contribution to ward off famine. The others were cook’s, as I said,’ she replied.

‘Then they certainly will be ill, and this will be their first and last afternoon in our garden,’ he retorted.

‘Children can digest a great deal; and the girl, though very prim and proper, said that travelling had made them hungry, which I interpreted in my own way,’ remarked she.

‘Their cousin was in town to-day. She looked ill, I thought,’ said the Rector, ignoring the allusion to the children being hungry.

‘She is not their cousin, or any relation to them,’ said Mrs Karslake.

Mr Karslake sat with the tea-cup poised half-way to his lips. ‘Did they say so? Then who are they, or what are they to her?’ he asked.

‘Friends,’ said his wife laconically, with a twinkle in her eye.

‘Really!’ said her husband calmly, and drank his tea without asking further questions, which, for that matter, he knew by experience were unnecessary.

‘So Jessica said;’ and, with a laugh at her own expense, she related the girl’s gentle rebuke.

‘I am delighted to hear it. It shows a nice feeling in the child. I am sorry I did not see them,’ he said.

‘Well, you will be at home on Sunday, so you can make their acquaintance then. I have asked them to come home to dinner with us after church, so that they may see you, and stop to my children’s circle,’ she told him.

‘Do you think Mrs Manning will let them come again so soon? She has some pride, you know. And to dinner?’ remarked her husband doubtfully.

‘It’s an odd sort of pride. Besides, I have written her a very diplomatic note, and explained that I wish them to meet their Rector, and that Sunday is the only day I am sure of having you at home,’ explained his wife.

‘We ought to ask Mrs Manning too, ought we not?’ suggested the Rector.

‘That’s just what I have done; but she won’t come, of course,’ replied his wife; and she proved to be right, for that evening a note, written in characters as stiff and angular as the widow herself, was brought over by Kezia, Mrs Manning’s maid-of-all-work, who took the opportunity to exchange friendly gossip with the Rectory cook.

‘As nice a young gent and lady as you could wish to see, and their clothes of the very best, and expensive, as one can see. I doubt ’tis a sad come-down for them to live in that bit of a house, which is not what I could wish for myself,’ said Kezia with a sniff.

‘Were they big folk, then?’ asked cook, ignoring Kezia’s sniff at the kind of place she was in.

‘Not a thing do I know about what they was nor where they come from. It’s not Mrs Manning that would tell a body anything. It’s only by going through their boxes, which is my duty, that I guess they’re the upper class, and by their ways and what they let drop when they talk to one another. But I doubt this place don’t suit them, for they haven’t much appetite, and could take no supper to speak of,’ remarked Kezia.

‘Ah,’ said cook complaisantly, ‘couldn’t they? Well, perhaps the food didn’t suit them as well as ours, for they ate a good enough tea over here—sandwiches and cakes and fruit—which we went out of our way to make tasty, knowing as The Acacias don’t go in for much in the food line.’

But cook had cause to regret her tactless boasting.

‘And what might you know of what we goes in for at The Acacias? It’s not from me you hear it; and if it’s the butcher’s boy, I’m surprised at you lowering yourself to ask him such questions, which *I’d* scorn to do, though I may be a general and you a professed cook. And,’ Kezia added rapidly, before cook should be able to defend herself, ‘as for the food not suiting them, it was a lovely rabbit-pie of a snared rabbit my father took himself; and though I say it as shouldn’t, my pastry ain’t to be beat, not by professed cooks! So there.’

‘I can well believe it, and I wouldn’t mind having a bit of it myself, Kezia; and very kind-hearted it was of you to make a pie of your father’s rabbit. We all feel for orphans, or ought to; and if I ain’t took in by you standing up for your place, I respect you for it, and we’ll say no more on the subject,’ put in cook soothingly, and Kezia went off satisfied.

Mrs Karslake read the note from the widow, and observed, ‘Mrs Manning says the children may come on Sunday, but that she never goes out anywhere herself, Ted.’

‘I’m glad to hear it—I mean that the children may come. You need not laugh, Christine; it was a slip. I only wish Mrs Manning would go out. I should very much like to know her. She has not a bad face, only a bitter one. Some trouble has hardened her and turned her against her fellow-creatures; but there is such an unhappy look in her eyes that I am sure she is not content with herself or the life she leads. However, she declines to see me or any one else, so one can only pray that she may be influenced for good somehow. Perhaps those children are sent for that purpose,’ he wound up gravely.

‘Very hard on the children; it’s a dreadful home for them. You will not mind if they spend their Sundays here, will you?’ asked his wife.

‘Mind, my dear? No, of course not. I shall be delighted,’ he replied promptly; and Mrs Karslake mentally composed a series of reasons for the orphans being allowed to spend every Sunday at the Rectory, the most obvious being that Mrs Manning did not observe Sunday at all, as far as one could see, though it could hardly be put to her like that.

CHAPTER III.

THE ORPHANS MAKE PLANS.

MEANWHILE the door of The Acacias had closed upon the orphan brother and sister, who saw, when they were accustomed to the darkness of the passage, that Mrs Manning herself had let them in.

'You are late. Mrs Karslake must have been tired of you,' she said in sharp tones, not calling them by their names, but addressing them as 'you.'

'I hope not, Mrs Manning. She would not let us go when I said I thought we ought to go home, but insisted that you would not mind our staying a little longer; and she has asked us to go again, she is so kind,' replied Jessica very gently.

Mrs Manning gave a 'Humph!' and observed, 'Supper will be at half-past seven in the schoolroom. Good-night;' and she turned on her heel.

'Good-night, Mrs Manning, and thank you for your goodness,' said Jessica.

'Good-night,' echoed the boy, but he added no thanks until he was in the schoolroom, where he banged the door to, and remarked, 'and thank you for nothing.'

'Oh Cuthbert!' cried his sister in accents of reproach.

'Nor it is,' he retorted ungrammatically. 'You don't owe any thanks to people that throw a word at you as if you were a dog.'

He had just uttered these words, when the door opened and Mrs Manning appeared. 'It is forbidden to bang doors in this house. The next time you do it, you will be sent straight to bed,' she said. Then, without another word, she turned and left the room, closing the door gently after her, in pointed contrast to Cuthbert's noisiness.

Jessica looked anxiously at her brother to see how he took this threat.

As for Cuthbert, he stared at Mrs Manning's back as she went out of the room, as if she were a strange animal which he had never seen before; then

he glanced at Jessica's puckered forehead, cast up his eyes with a comical grimace, uttered the one word 'Cracked,' and stood on his head.

'No, Cuthbert, she isn't; she is only—not used to boys and girls; and—and—we are a great bother to her. It is very good of her to take us, for you know no one else would have us,' said Jessica, her voice trembling.

Cuthbert, finding his gymnastics did not, as usual, make his sister smile, turned a somersault and came to anchor on a chair. 'Don't cry, Jess, for goodness' sake. Just wait till I'm a man, and you shall have a house of your own, with me, and a five-hundred-horse-power car, and every luxury,' he cried.

Jessica smiled. 'I'm not going to cry, unless you go banging doors and getting into trouble with Mrs Manning,' she promised.

'I sha'n't bang doors on purpose, but a fellow can't always remember to shut a door as if he were a cat,' he protested.

Jessica laughed at last. 'I didn't know cats shut doors,' she retorted.

'Oh, well, you know what I mean. They sneak about without making any noise, and two-footed cats do the same, and expect other people to do it,' he said with meaning.

'Don't. It's not nice to talk like that about people when you are in their house and eating their food,' objected Jessica.

A sullen look came on Cuthbert's usually bright face. 'I'll tell you what it is, Jess; if there's much more of this I sha'n't stick it, but go to sea. They take boys in the navy at fourteen.'

Jessica gave a cry and caught his arm in both her hands. 'And leave me all alone, Cuthbert? Oh, don't! I have no one left but you! I couldn't stay in this dreadful place alone,' she cried.

A grim look of satisfaction passed over the boy's face. 'Thank goodness, you own up that you hate this house too! All right, sis; I won't forsake you, like other people have done.' He stopped and clenched his fists. 'But it's only for a few years. I shall start earning my living when I am seventeen, and we'll live in a little cottage first, till we grow rich,' he said.

'How are you going to do that?' demanded Jessica, not because she had much faith in his castles in the air, but because she wanted to take his thoughts off the present, and perhaps her own too.

‘I shall begin at the bottom of the ladder, of course, as an errand-boy,’ he began, his hands in his pockets and his legs swinging to and fro.

‘At seventeen? I should hope you would be something better than that with your education,’ Jessica objected.

‘If it weren’t for you, I’d go and be an errand-boy now,’ he replied gloomily.

‘But why an errand-boy?’ inquired his sister, puzzled.

‘All millionaires have begun like that. I don’t know why, but they have, or say they have; and I’m going to be a millionaire,’ he declared, nodding at her.

‘Don’t be a millionaire. I would rather you were a famous doctor or lawyer or something,’ she said.

‘I want money—a lot of money—and I don’t want to wait until I am an old man to have it,’ he said.

His sister did not reply at once. Evidently she understood why he wanted ‘a lot of money,’ as she did not upbraid him for wishing for it, but only said with a strange earnestness, ‘I hope you may get it. Oh, I do hope so!’

‘But I’ll tell you one thing, Jess; I’m not going to stand any nonsense from that old thing,’ he observed.

‘We sha’n’t see much of her, Cuthbert dear—only at dinner-time—so surely you can be polite for that little time. It is better than it might have been, because, you see, we have this room to ourselves, and we have each other,’ she urged.

‘Yes; but if she comes in here interfering and ordering me about, there will be ructions,’ he declared.

‘She has a right to give orders in her own house,’ said Jessica in a tone of resignation.

‘Not idiotic orders like sending me to bed as if I were a baby; and, what is more, I won’t go,’ he cried hotly.

‘I wish I could; I am so tired! It seems ages since this morning,’ replied Jessica. She sat on a chair at the table, looking out of the window.

The room faced the road and the Rectory, but whereas the Karslakes’ house faced south and was always sunny, The Acacias faced north, and the room in which the children were sitting seemed as if no ray of sun ever

entered it. Mrs Manning had called it the schoolroom presumably because the two were to learn their lessons in it, but a more dreary schoolroom could scarcely have been found. The walls were papered with an old-fashioned and very faded flock paper which had once been blue and yellow, but was now a dirty white and gray; and four prints in black frames hung on the walls. A suite of furniture upholstered in black horsehair much the worse for wear, a pair of faded blue rep curtains, and a deal table completed the contents of the room. Carpet or rug there was none; nor were there any white muslin curtains.

As Jessica's eyes fell on the house opposite they brightened. Not a thought crossed her mind of the contrast between the bright and inviting rooms at the Rectory and the dull and depressing one in which they found themselves.

'Isn't Mrs Karslake nice, Cuthbert?' she asked with enthusiasm.

'Yes, ripping. I wonder what Mr Karslake is like; an old fogy, I should think,' replied her brother.

'Why on earth should you think such a thing? Mrs Karslake doesn't look like a person who would marry an old fogy!' protested Jessica, looking at her brother with wide-open eyes.

'He looks awfully strict in his photograph,' said Cuthbert.

'Did you think so, Cuthbert? I thought he had such kind eyes, though he looks rather grave,' said his sister.

'Anyway, it's a blessing we've got a garden we can go into sometimes. This awful back-yard would give me the blues, if I had to sit there when I wanted to sit out of doors,' said Cuthbert.

'I was wondering whether Mrs Manning would like us to try to make it a little tidy,' suggested Jessica.

Her brother exclaimed with dismay, 'A little tidy! Why, it would want a proper gardener there for at least a month to cut down all those weeds and dig it up! And even if he did, what would be the good? She never sits in it; and I'm sure we don't want to, with her spying upon us out of the windows.'

'Perhaps she would sit there if it was nice and tidy,' his sister persisted.

'It might be tidy, but it could never be nice, with no pretty flower-beds or anything. And, besides, we couldn't do it ourselves even if we gave up all our free time to it, and I'm sure I don't want to spend all my time grubbing in this garden for that'——

‘Don’t, Cuthbert,’ his sister begged him.

‘Besides, I have just got an idea,’ he answered.

Cuthbert was a very bright and intelligent boy, and advanced for his years. He was, indeed, the son of a very clever father, and had inherited his father’s talents and character, which was a very headstrong and impulsive one.

‘What is your new idea?’ inquired his sister with a good-natured smile; for Cuthbert was always having new ideas, and some of them were not very practical.

‘I’m going to begin and earn money at once,’ he replied.

Jessica laughed. They had that day arrived in this strange town, which seemed to her so sleepy that she wondered what the people there did for their livelihood, and they knew nobody but the Rector’s wife and Mrs Manning; so no wonder Jessica was sceptical of her brother’s powers of beginning to amass a fortune at once.

‘You may laugh, but I mean it. I’m going to earn money, if it’s only a penny a day, before the week’s out,’ he said, after a little hesitation in fixing the date.

Jessica looked at him with puckered brow. He was a great anxiety to her, this young brother of hers, always getting into scrapes, out of which she had to get him. Indeed, it seemed to Jessica that a good deal of her spare time was taken up in this way, and she was afraid he was going to do something foolish in his eagerness to get rich quickly.

‘How are you going to earn your penny? Not by being an errand-boy, I hope, because I am sure Mrs Manning won’t like it; and it’s no use saying you don’t care what she would like, because you know we must stay with her for the present. Father wished it,’ she added in a low tone. For her brother had nodded when she spoke of his being an errand-boy, and she knew that when he got an idea into his head, it was very difficult to get it out, however ridiculous it was.

‘Don’t you worry, sis; I won’t do anything to annoy Mrs Manning. There’s nothing disgraceful in earning money honestly.’ He stopped suddenly; evidently the word ‘honestly’ reminded him of something, for he added energetically, ‘And I will earn it honestly, and the sooner I begin the better.’

‘I don’t want to stop you, Cuthbert, but you know you have your lessons, and if you work hard at the Grammar School now, you will be better able to earn more when you leave there,’ his sister argued.

‘I’m going to work hard at school, you bet; but I’m going to earn money too—you see if I don’t,’ he persisted.

‘Well, put it off till next week, please, Cuthbert; that’s only three or four days. If you rush into anything in such a hurry, you will be sorry afterwards,’ Jessica pleaded.

‘All right; I’ll wait till Monday,’ he agreed.

And with this Jessica had to be content.

It was at this juncture that Kezia, the kind-hearted maid, had come up with their supper, which consisted of rabbit-pie and bread and cheese. As a matter of fact, it would have been bread and cheese only if it had not been for her, and she put her pie down on the table with a flushed face and an air of triumph. ‘There, miss and master; there’s a nice “cooked” supper for you of snared rabbit, as I can answer for it, my father having dropped it here this very afternoon,’ she announced, ‘cooked’ being Dorset for ‘hot.’

Jessica grasped at once that it was an offering from Kezia, and said in her pleasant way, ‘How nice, Kezia! I have never tasted rabbit. Is it like hare?’

Kezia stared in astonishment at this statement. ‘Never tasted rabbit! Well, then, you’ve a treat in store—specially snared rabbit,’ she declared.

‘Why snared?’ said Jessica; and ‘I hope it isn’t poached,’ Cuthbert added.

‘Poached? Not it,’ said Kezia; and then she heard some sound, and added hastily, ‘I must go!’

‘I say, Jess, we ought not to have said we had not tasted rabbit; it looked like putting on side. But I wish it weren’t snared; it’s not a sporting way of killing them.’

‘It’s not half so cruel. I only wish I were hungrier, but we must take a little,’ replied Jessica.

When Kezia came back, and looked disappointed that so little had been eaten, Jessica tactfully explained that the rabbit was very good, but they weren’t very hungry, and would have it to-morrow for dinner. Then Kezia

went off, as has been related, to the Rectory with a note accepting the invitation for Sunday.

The brother and sister sat in the dreary schoolroom, where there were no books, or pictures, or games of any sort to divert their minds, till the twilight deepened into gloom, and Cuthbert said suddenly, 'I say Jess, we may as well light the gas. She can't expect us to sit in the dark, I suppose.'

Jessica roused herself. 'No, of course not. We can't go to bed yet, and I was thinking, Cuthbert, that we might put some of our books and photos here; it would make the room feel more homelike,' she said.

Cuthbert, who had been sitting there kicking his heels in a disconsolate way, sat up straight and brightened considerably. 'So we might. We shall be at school all day on Monday, and sha'n't have time, and I shall want my Latin books and dictionary and a lot of things, which I had better keep in this room;' and so saying, he went off to his room to get his things, and Jessica followed him to hers, which was next her brother's.

Cuthbert apparently found something which interested him in his boxes or his room, for he did not return for some time.

Jessica had a sudden idea which seemed to please her. She began unpacking hastily, and made good use of his absence to do what she could to beautify the room. She put a beautiful picture of her mother over the mantelpiece where a nail happened to be, and books on the shelves, and photographs in silver frames about the room. Then she took an old-fashioned Paisley shawl which they had used to dress themselves up in in their nursery days, and covered the table with it, and then put her desk upon it, and a quaint old silver inkstand in the middle.

She was just contemplating her work and trying to think that the room looked cheerful, when Kezia came in.

'Well, there! you've made the place more comfortable-like already; and if you'd care for some flowers now, I've got a fine bouquet downstairs you can have and welcome, for Mrs Manning doesn't care for flowers messing up the kitchen (nor anywhere else that she goes,' she added *sotto voce*). 'And my mother allus will bring me a bunch every week, and I don't like to deny her,' the maid exclaimed.

'Oh, thank you, Kezia. That will be lovely. I am so fond of flowers,' cried Jessica, her eyes shining. She had just been thinking that if she could have had a few of the flowers she saw at the Rectory, she could make the room much brighter.

Kezia returned in a very few minutes with an enormous bunch of country flowers, collected and put together without any regard for colour. 'I stuck them in a gallipot, but I've got some vases downstairs that you could put them in, and they'd make three or four bunches,' she said as she handed the flowers to Jessica.

Jessica gratefully accepted the flowers and the offer of vases; and when they came she arranged Kezia's bouquet so tastefully in the different vases, and distributed them so cleverly about the room, that it was transformed.

She had just finished, when there came a kick at the door. Jessica, who knew the ways of her brother, guessed that he had his arms full, and flew to open it before he should have time to give a more vigorous kick and offend Mrs Manning. She was rewarded by his sudden stop and look of astonishment.

'My word, sis, you are a good one at arranging flowers and things! Why, the beastly place doesn't look half bad. And—where did you get the tablecloth? Did Mrs Manning give it to you? I hope I sha'n't ink it!' he exclaimed, coming forward and putting down his load of books on the arm-chair.

'You have done worse than that to it already. Don't you recognise it?' she asked, laughing at her brother's mystified face as he stared around him in wonder.

He went up to it and examined it. 'The old nursery shawl! Well, it has been an Arab tent, a gipsy cloak, and a soldier's blanket; but this is the best thing it has been yet,' he cried, laughing heartily.

'I'm glad you like it,' said Jessica, who was putting Cuthbert's books on another wooden shelf.

He sat on the arm of the chair and watched her, his foot swinging to and fro. 'This is really what women are made for, if they would only believe it. Look what you've done in a few minutes, and I should have stayed here months and never made it half so nice. And I don't mind telling you now that I was wondering how I was going to live in the place;' and he gave a sigh, which he tried to choke back.

Jessica laughed, well pleased, for she knew that the boy loved pretty things; but she only said, 'A nice return for all my trouble! To tell me arranging books and flowers is all I am good for!'

But he put his arm round her neck, and said, as he gave it a squeeze, 'You know I did not mean that, Jess. You are worth—all the world to me.'

CHAPTER IV.

CUTHBERT STARTS TO BE A MILLIONAIRE.

THE REV. EDWARD KARSLAKE always assured his wife that it was absurd of people to say that he looked at them specially in church, because he never saw any face. 'It is all a blur to me, and I cannot distinguish any one. If I could, I should be unable to preach at all,' he declared.

But on this particular Sunday, the first Sunday that Mrs Manning's wards spent in Bowcester, and consequently made their first appearance in the parish church, out of the hazy sea of faces turned towards him emerged clearly the earnest face of a girl of about fourteen who listened with her soul in her eyes.

She was a stranger, and so absorbed was the preacher in the message he had to give that he did not stop for a moment to wonder or remember who she might be, though he found himself speaking almost to her alone, without knowing that his text applied particularly to her.

His wife did not wait for him after church, but she stepped across the aisle to the two Standishes, who had been put into the seat that, according to an old custom, belonged by rights to The Acacias, and said in a low tone, 'Come along; we will not wait for my husband.' And when they were outside the church and crossing the old graveyard, with its moss-grown tombstones, she continued in her lively way, 'I never stop for my husband. I think it best to leave him a few minutes to come down to earth.'

Jessica flashed such a sympathetic glance at her that Mrs Karslake began to have doubts as to whether the girl was as irresponsive as she had at first thought her to be; but that she was either very shy or reserved was evident, and it was Cuthbert who carried on a lively conversation with Mrs Karslake while they went round the garden, and helped her to remove some pest or blight from a favourite flower.

'I don't know what I should do without my garden. I could not live in a big town where there were none,' Mrs Karslake exclaimed, as she bent over a rose and picked off some dead leaves.

‘No, nor could I,’ agreed Cuthbert heartily.

Mrs Karslake looked at him and exclaimed impulsively, ‘Then how do you get on at The Acacias? There’s not much of a garden there, is there?’

‘Oh, well, no, there isn’t,’ he admitted.

‘But we are going to try to make it pretty,’ said Jessica.

‘Are you? I think that is a very good idea. It could be made a very nice little garden. It once was, but that is a great many years ago, and I’m afraid you will have hard work to bring it into order. But I am glad you like gardening too,’ said Mrs Karslake.

‘It is jolly hard work; but Jessica and I are going to get up awfully early, and we’ve been looking round, and have found some jolly good roots and several rose-bushes. I really want a spade and some clippers. Jessica has been talking of cutting the grass with a knife and scissors, but it’s awfully slow work,’ explained Cuthbert.

‘I should think so. But you should borrow ours. We have two or three spades. And as for the grass, our man would cut it with a scythe in no time. It’s only a small plot, if I remember right,’ said Mrs Karslake.

‘Oh, thanks awfully; but’—— began Cuthbert, looking rather embarrassed, and casting an appealing glance at Jessica to help him out of his difficulty; and, as usual, she came to the rescue.

‘We should like to borrow your spade, if we may; but, you see, it is not our garden, and though Mrs Manning is very good, and does not seem to mind our walking in it, I do not think she would like us to bring in a strange man; and really I can get on very well with my scissors, considering,’ she explained.

‘Yes, you’d better say considering. She will get a sore place on her thumb from doing it,’ laughed Cuthbert.

‘Good-morning, young people. What is amusing you?’ inquired the Rector, coming up at this moment and hearing Cuthbert’s merry laugh.

Mrs Karslake introduced her two young guests, and added, ‘We are discussing the garden at The Acacias. Jessica is going to cut the grass with scissors, and make her hands sore.’

‘What courage to undertake such a task! But we should teach this young man to use a scythe, and let him do it for you,’ suggested the Rector as he

looked, with a kindly smile, at the two children, for they were little more; and his wife again envied him his talent for saying the right thing.

'Oh, thanks very much. I should like to use a scythe,' said Cuthbert. 'Our men never would let me. But I don't know whether I shall have time,' he added, pulling himself up suddenly, as it seemed to the Rector.

'To be sure, you have your lessons to do; but it won't take long, and it will be a change from brain-work. For my part, if I had a son I'd make him do something more useful than playing everlasting games. Not that I disapprove of games, but I cannot see why all a boy's recreation-time should be given over to cricket and football,' he replied.

'Oh, I don't mean to go in for sports much. I sha'n't have time,' said Cuthbert again.

The Rector looked a little puzzled, but said nothing, and walked on with Jessica, while Mrs Karslake fell behind with Cuthbert, with whom she had a lively conversation on the subject of sports, of which she was very fond.

Mr Karslake took Jessica off to the conservatory to see an orchid of which he was very proud. 'I am sometimes afraid of becoming foolish over my flowers, but they are such satisfactory friends,' he remarked.

'Oh yes, aren't they?' said Jessica in one of her rare outbursts of candour.

'Only that one ought not to choose one's friends for the satisfaction they give us, I suppose. But I am beginning to give you another sermon, and that's too bad,' laughed the Rector.

'I shouldn't mind, really,' said Jessica earnestly.

Mr Karslake looked at her very kindly. 'That is very good of you; but I won't inflict one on you just now. If ever you want one, come to me. It must be a very difficult task that is before you just now, for you have to be a mother to your young brother, and in a strange place; so, if ever I can help you, you must let me know.'

Jessica gave him a grateful look. 'Indeed I will. Cuthbert is a very good boy really, except that he is a little noisy and high-spirited; but there's no harm in that, is there?' she asked anxiously.

Mr Karslake guessed pretty well what that anxiety meant, but being a very tactful man, he replied, 'No indeed, except that it is trying for the people he lives with. But boys would not be boys if they were not noisy. You must send him over here when he gets obstreperous. He can make as much

noise as he likes at the other end of this garden, and no one will hear him,' said the Rector. And then they went in to the Sunday midday dinner, which was an institution at Bowcester Rectory.

After dinner Mr Karslake invited Cuthbert to go to his study for a smoke; and Cuthbert, who found the Rector was neither an old fogy nor severe, but very cheery and pleasant, accepted the invitation with great pride, though, as the Rector very well knew, he did not smoke.

After a few questions about his school-work, Mr Karslake said quietly, 'And how do you propose to spend your spare time? With your abilities you ought not to find your lessons very difficult, and if you are not going in for sports you will have a good deal of spare time on your hands, for in this sleepy place you will not find much to do.'

Mr Karslake was leaning back in an arm-chair near the French window which looked on to the garden, and Cuthbert was sitting opposite to him in another, which went back so far that he was fain to sit forward on the edge and clasp his knee with his hands, as he answered with his usual frankness, 'The fact is, I'm going to find some occupation.'

'Yes? What kind of occupation?' inquired Mr Karslake with interest.

'Some lucrative occupation,' said Cuthbert.

He seemed such a child to be using these big words, or to be talking of earning money at all; still, the Rector did not smile, but only looked sympathetic, and inquired, 'Have you any particular—er—bent? I mean, have you thought of any particular means of making money?'

'No, I haven't,' the boy admitted, adding, with a laugh, 'I said I'd like to start as an errand-boy, but Jess, my sister, doesn't like the idea at all; so, if I could find something else to do, of course I'd prefer it.'

'What is the attraction in running errands?' inquired Mr Karslake, swinging his eye-glasses and looking keenly at Cuthbert.

Cuthbert laughed again. 'It's in a book I read. All the rich men began that way;' and again he repeated his desire to get rich as soon as possible.

Mr Karslake shook his head doubtfully. 'Riches are a doubtful blessing, my boy; but it depends upon what use we make of them, of course. Still, there are a good many things I would rather be than be rich,' he said.

'I particularly want to get a lot of money, and—it's really for a very good use, sir; only I can't explain it,' said Cuthbert earnestly, and looked at the Rector with his honest eyes.

‘I believe you, my boy; and I am very glad you have mentioned it to me, because I think I know of some occupation which might serve your purpose, and mine too,’ said the Rector.

‘Oh, really? And should I begin to earn money at once?’ asked Cuthbert.

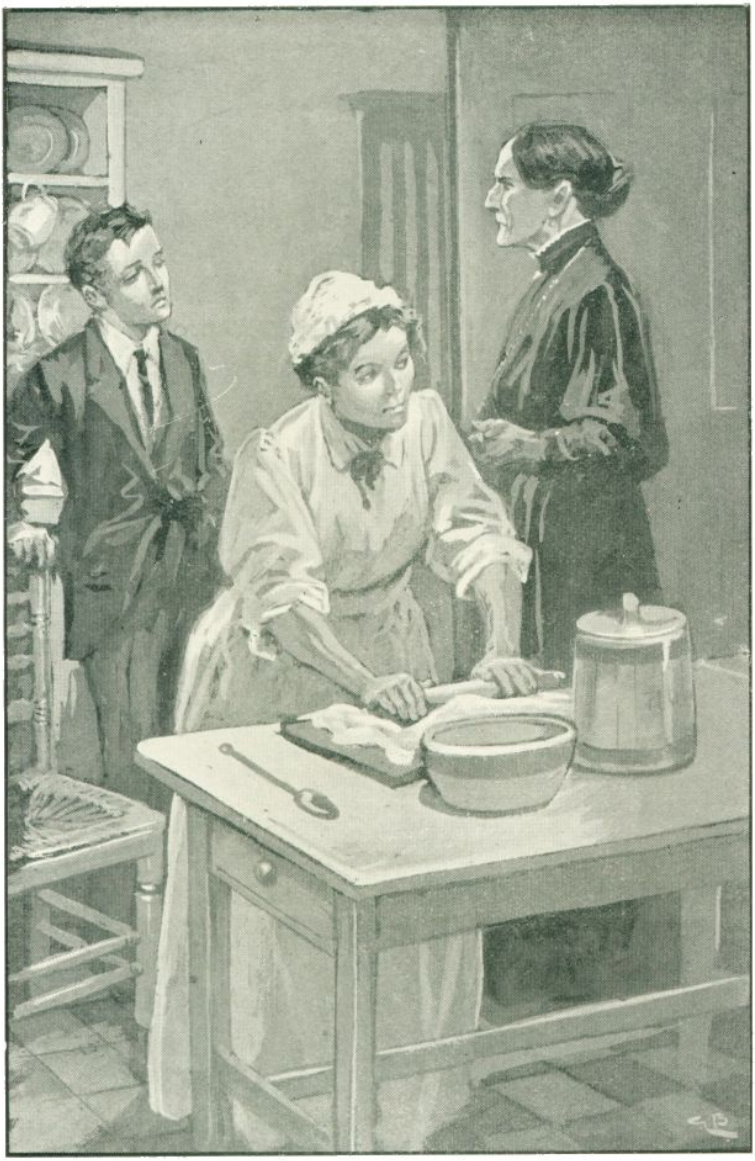
Mr Karslake smiled at the boy’s eagerness. ‘Most certainly. It is hard work, but the pay would be good, for a beginner—better than you would get as an errand-boy. But I am afraid I must go to open the Sunday school now. If you will come back after your class and have a cup of tea with us, we can talk it over,’ said Mr Karslake, rising.

‘I—— Thank you, I won’t come to tea, because Jessica and I have it together,’ replied Cuthbert, who would not leave Jessica alone at The Acacias on this, their first, Sunday.

‘I am sure Jessica will be kind and come too,’ said the Rector.

‘Thank you,’ repeated Cuthbert. ‘I’ll ask her.’

But after the class Jessica declared that she must go back to The Acacias.



‘What are you doing in the kitchen?’ **PAGE 58.**

‘What rot, Jess! Mrs Manning won’t even know whether we are out or in. You know she never takes any notice of us unless she is absolutely obliged; and it’s my belief that the more we are out the better pleased she is. So come along to the Rectory. It’s much jollier there than in our dull schoolroom, as she calls it, over the way.’

‘No, Cuthbert, really I would rather not; and, to tell you the truth, I’m rather glad that you are going to be out, because I want to talk to Mrs Manning; so you see you need not mind leaving me alone,’ declared Jessica.

‘What on earth do you want to talk to Mrs Manning for? I shall give her a wide berth, and I should advise you to do the same,’ said Cuthbert.

‘Go and talk over your business with Mr Karslake, and let me talk with Mrs Manning. I wonder what he has found for you. I do hope it will be something pleasant,’ said Jessica.

‘I don’t care twopence about its being pleasant as long as it pays. I say, I hope he doesn’t think I’m a money-grubber!’ observed Cuthbert as the thought struck him.

‘I don’t believe he would think evil of anybody; and as long as you do it for a right reason, it doesn’t matter what anybody thinks,’ said Jessica.

‘That’s all very fine, but I shouldn’t like Mr Karslake to think that of me, because he’s jolly decent,’ said Cuthbert.

‘Yes, he is. Good-bye. Explain to them that I could not come, because I had to go back to tea with Mrs Manning,’ said Jessica, going off.

‘I sha’n’t say any such stuff, because I don’t believe you are going to do any such thing,’ Cuthbert called after her.

Jessica turned round, rather indignant. ‘What do you mean? Are you accusing me of not telling the truth?’ she asked.

‘You think it’s true, but I’m sure that it is not, and that you will just have tea in the schoolroom alone,’ said Cuthbert.

‘We shall see,’ said Jessica, and turned into The Acacias.

Cuthbert crossed the road and went to the Rectory, where he found Mr and Mrs Karslake and some friends having tea in the garden.

‘Why, where is Jessica? I thought she was coming too?’ cried Mrs Karslake when Cuthbert arrived alone.

‘She had to go to The Acacias, thank you,’ said Cuthbert.

‘But she’s coming here for tea, I hope?’ asked Mrs Karslake.

‘She said I was to thank you, and to say that she had to go home to tea with Mrs Manning,’ explained Cuthbert, stammering a little over his message, which he felt sure would not be believed.

‘I’m sorry’ was all Mrs Karslake said; but Cuthbert would have been gratified to know that she was of the same opinion as himself that Jessica would have done better to come and have a sociable tea with them under the trees.

Cuthbert was so eager to hear what the Rector had to say to him that he was glad when tea was over, in spite of the fact that Mrs Karslake had picked a lot of strawberries for him.

‘Well, then,’ she declared, as he said he would not wait to have them, but must go to Mr Karslake’s study, ‘you must take them home with you and give Jessica some. Tell her I picked them expressly for you both. And take this bouquet of roses too, will you?’

‘Oh, thank you!’ cried Cuthbert; but he was evidently so eager to be off that Mrs Karslake did not try to keep him.

‘I’m sorry we have not seen the girl. The boy seems nice; but she must have odd taste to prefer Mrs Manning’s company to yours,’ said a lady who had dropped in to tea.

‘Yes, Cuthbert is a nice boy, and his sister is very nice also,’ replied Mrs Karslake, ignoring the allusion to Mrs Manning, for her husband had positively forbidden gossip to be talked at the Rectory.

‘Do you know anything about mechanics, Cuthbert?’ inquired Mr Karslake when they were in the study.

The boy was rather disappointed that the Rector did not tell him at once about the work he was to earn money by, but he answered at once, ‘Not much; but I mean to take it up here. I should like to go in for engineering if —oh, well, if I had a chance.’

‘I’m very glad to hear that, for the work I have in view is to help in the construction of a small model of a machine which I hope may one day be of use to mankind,’ said the Rector, looking pleased.

‘I’d like that awfully; but do you think I could be of any use?’ inquired Cuthbert doubtfully.

‘I don’t think it; I know it. But it will be hard work, and perhaps you will not like being kept in my workshop on a fine summer evening,’ said Mr Karslake.

‘I sha’n’t mind that. It is much better than I expected—I mean, than being an errand-boy, or doing some one’s accounts for him; and I shall be learning too,’ replied Cuthbert.

‘Then I shall consider you engaged as my assistant. It is a fortunate thing that you spoke to me to-day, or shall we say providential? For I was going to try to find a boy in the town to do this work. It is skilled labour, and I think a fair price would be sixpence an hour, for it will need brains and care. Let us consider the bargain concluded, and I will explain to you what the object of my invention is,’ said Mr Karslake; and he went into details, to which Cuthbert listened with intelligent interest, at times asking questions which showed that he understood something about practical mechanics. The Rector was delighted with him.

‘Well?’ said Mrs Karslake that evening when she found herself alone with her husband.

‘It is well. The boy will be very useful,’ he replied.

‘You would have employed him just the same if he had not been any good,’ observed his wife.

‘Don’t let him hear you say that, or I shall lose him. He is as proud in his way as his sister is in hers. Fine characters, the girl especially,’ he remarked.

‘Possibly; but she is not easy to get on with, or, rather, to get intimate with. She never talks of her past life, and I saw her give Cuthbert a warning look when he began some remark about what they used to do—which I think a mistake,’ said Mrs Karslake.

‘Why a mistake? She probably feels sad when she thinks of the past, and prefers to look forward to the future,’ suggested he.

‘It looks as if there were something to hide, and I hate mysteries. Besides, it’s very unnatural,’ she declared.

‘That does not concern us or any one else. Those children are too young to be anything but innocent,’ said Mr Karslake with decision, and his wife took the hint, and dropped the subject.

‘I shall want to keep Cuthbert rather late some evenings. I wonder whether I ought to ask leave of Mrs Manning?’ observed Mr Karslake.

‘Oh, I should not stand upon ceremony with her. She will probably make it known if she does not like it pretty soon,’ said Mrs Karslake; and added, ‘But I hope you are not going to sit up half the night, because that will be very bad for Cuthbert, to say nothing of yourself.’

‘Not later than ten o’clock. But perhaps he ought to go to bed earlier,’ said her husband.

‘I should not think so. But what about his lessons?’ inquired Mrs Karslake.

‘He says he can do them in the morning. It appears they get up at seven o’clock.’

‘Yes; I saw them in the garden this morning. He will not have time for that any more,’ remarked Mrs Karslake.

‘The difficulty is that I shall want him for the whole evening sometimes, so that he will miss his supper, as I shall leave him to watch the machine working.’

‘That won’t matter, I suppose, so long as he stops in the room. He can take his eyes off the thing long enough to eat something if I send it in to him?’ inquired Mrs Karslake, who knew nothing of mechanics.

‘Oh yes; I never thought of that,’ said the Rector.

Mrs Karslake smiled. ‘I am very glad I thought of it, and it certainly is well—very well,’ she said with content.

CHAPTER V.

JESSICA TRIES TO MAKE FRIENDS.

As for Cuthbert, he walked soberly across to The Acacias, it being Sunday, and looked up at the schoolroom window to see if Jessica was watching for him. As there was no sign of her, he shut the door quietly after him, and ran up to the schoolroom full of his good news. But the schoolroom was empty. Then it struck him that she had said that she was going to talk to Mrs Manning, and he supposed she must be with her still.

The boy stood with his hands in his pockets, waiting impatiently for this long talk to be over; but after waiting, as it seemed to him, an hour, though it was scarcely a quarter of an hour, he could stand his own company no longer, and went down to the kitchen, where he found Kezia reading a Sunday magazine.

'Where is my sister, Kezia?' he asked.

'I'm sure I don't know, Master Cuthbert, unless she's in her own bedroom,' replied the maid.

'In her bedroom! What on earth can she be doing there? But I don't believe she is, because I passed her room to go to the schoolroom, and I did not hear her moving. Besides, she would have heard me and called me in,' argued Cuthbert.

'She's in there, unless she's in the schoolroom, for there's nowhere else for her to be if she's in the house,' declared Kezia.

'I think she must be with Mrs Manning. Do you know where she is?' inquired Cuthbert, feeling uncomfortable, somehow, about Jessica and the silence which reigned in the house.

'With Mrs Manning! That's not very likely,' cried Kezia.

'Why not?' demanded Cuthbert, irritated by Kezia's tone. 'It's just where she is, I'm sure, because she would not stay to tea at the Rectory, as she wanted to talk to Mrs Manning.'

‘Well, I never! So that’s what she came back for. Well, don’t you ever let her do such a silly thing again,’ cried Kezia.

‘I don’t see anything silly in wanting to speak to one’s guardian. It’s a great deal sillier to live in the house with people and never speak to them,’ cried Cuthbert hotly.

‘Sh, sh, Master Cuthbert! I didn’t mean to put you out like that. I only meant to say that it was a pity for Miss Jessica not to stop at the Rectory, where things is so pleasant, instead of coming home here, where she didn’t get a welcome,’ explained Kezia.

‘How do you mean?’ cried Cuthbert, clenching his fists and looking pugnacious. ‘Wasn’t Mrs Manning nice to her? I’ — —

What more Cuthbert would have said is uncertain, for at that moment the kitchen door opened and Mrs Manning came in. She was a tall, thin woman, with black hair, and black eyes which ‘looked angry,’ as Kezia once said, even when she was not displeased, and they looked very fiercely at Cuthbert.

‘What are you doing in the kitchen?’ she demanded.

‘I came to ask Kezia where Jessica is. I can’t find her,’ he replied.

Mrs Manning looked at him with a strange expression on her face as she replied, ‘She is probably in her room, the proper place for her;’ and she turned and left the kitchen.

Cuthbert looked after her with awe. ‘I say,’ he observed abruptly, ‘do you think she’s all there? Because, if not, I’m hanged if I’m going to let my sister stop here. It isn’t safe, you know, and no one could expect us to.’

‘She’s safe enough, so don’t you be afraid of her. I’ve been here a year now, and she’s never any different. She’s just a miserable woman, and a body can only be sorry for her, poor thing!’ said Kezia.

Cuthbert was just going off, but stopped to ask, ‘Why is she miserable? Has she had any trouble lately?’

‘I don’t know about lately. But she’s lost her husband; that may have soured her, and anybody’s miserable that keeps to themselves like that, and never does a hand’s-turn for any one else,’ opined Kezia.

‘I can’t make it out, and it’s all rotten,’ said Cuthbert in a discontented tone; and he went off to Jessica’s room, the door of which he opened, only to stop at the entrance in amazement, for the blinds were pulled down and the

room was quite dark. ‘Jess! Jess! Are you there?’ he cried, for he could see nothing.

‘Yes, Cuthbert. I’m lying on the bed,’ replied Jessica. ‘I have a little headache, but it’s better now; so come and tell me what you did at the Rectory. Have you got something to do?’

‘Yes, ripping. But, I say, is your head really bad? I can’t see you. What are the blinds down for? Can’t I pull them up?’ he asked.

‘The light. I’d rather have them down, Cuthbert. You can talk as well without the light. Come and sit on my bed and tell me all about it. I have been wondering how you got on,’ replied Jessica.

Cuthbert was not too full of his own projects to see that there was something the matter with Jessica, but he only said, ‘I got on all right, but they were very sorry that you were not there; and, what’s more, the next time we’re invited to tea, you’ve got to come too, or else I sha’n’t go; and —— Oh, I forgot. Just wait half a jiff. I’ve got something for you from Mrs Karslake;’ and he left the room, and Jessica heard him run down to the kitchen.

She got up and went quickly to the basin, sponged her face, took a little eau-de-Cologne, and then drew up a blind and looked in the glass. Seeing that the traces of tears were no longer visible, and that she only looked as if she had a headache—which was true—she lay down again, and waited for Cuthbert, who was away a few minutes, having gone to ask Kezia for a plate to put the strawberries upon.

‘Here, Kezia, you have some of these. I’m going to make Jess eat some; she’s got a headache or something,’ said Cuthbert, as he put some of the strawberries upon another plate for Kezia, and handed her two roses from the bouquet.

‘Thank you, Master Cuthbert! What beautiful strawberries! They’ll be the very thing for her. And roses! Well, Mrs Karslake is kind, but they’re too fine for my kitchen,’ protested Kezia.

‘Wear them when you go out with your young man to-night, Kezia,’ suggested Cuthbert, laughing. Not that he knew that Kezia had a young man.

But it happened to be a good shot, for Kezia exclaimed, ‘Now whoever told you that I had a young man, Master Cuthbert? The way people talk about other people’s private business is enough to make a body keep to herself,’ cried Kezia, half indignant and half-laughing, taking the roses in her hand, however.

‘Nobody told me, Kezia. I only guessed that you were too handsome not to have a young man, and I knew you hadn’t put on that smart pink bow only to sit in the kitchen,’ declared Cuthbert.

‘You get along with your nonsense, Master Cuthbert, and take some sugar with those strawberries,’ said Kezia, pretending not to be flattered. ‘And, Master Cuthbert, if I was you I’d not say anything to Miss Jessica about the mistress. It’s time wasted trying to be friendly with her, as I found out as soon as I came here; and Miss Jessica has found it out to-day unless I am mistaken, and that’s what her headache means. But least said, soonest mended.’

‘All right,’ said Cuthbert as he went off with his tray.—‘Come on, sis; Mrs Karslake says we’ve got to eat these because she picked them for us. They’ll do your head good. You look hot,’ he said as he put the tray down on the bed between himself and Jessica, and began preparing a mash for her.

‘They are delicious. But tell me about your talk with Mr Karslake,’ she said, as she began to eat the strawberries.

Cuthbert told her about the work Mr Karslake proposed, and wound up: ‘And he said he would sometimes want me every evening for an hour or two, and sometimes only twice or thrice a week, but I should have to stay for the whole evening from six to ten. So, you see, I shall earn about nine or ten times sixpence every week—that is four or five shillings. I’ve made up my mind to put away something every week, only a shilling to begin with; but that’s something towards my fortune, isn’t it, Jess?’ he inquired.

‘Yes, indeed. I never thought you would get so much as that. I was afraid you would go and be an errand-boy, and I should not have liked that,’ replied Jessica.

‘I can’t say I should have liked it myself, but I’d have done it if I couldn’t have helped myself,’ observed Cuthbert.

‘The boys would have been very unpleasant,’ suggested Jessica.

‘Then I’d have punched their heads, that’s all,’ retorted Cuthbert.

Jessica laughed, and the headache, which had been nerves, disappeared, and she said, ‘Let’s go and sit in the garden, Cuthbert. It’s hot in this room.’

‘Right you are,’ he agreed, abstaining from saying that there was no decent spot to sit in, which was what he really thought.

‘Hallo!’ he exclaimed when they went out of the back-door. ‘Who put these seats here, I wonder?’ for there were two wicker chairs put out on the

gravel path just in front of the patch of grass which Jessica had been laboriously trying to cut with her scissors.

'Kezia, I suppose. Anyway, let's sit on them; I want to talk to you about something,' remarked Jessica, taking one chair.

'What about?' demanded Cuthbert, with an air of resignation, guessing from Jessica's tone that it was not anything very pleasant.

'It's about our being here,' began Jessica, and hesitated, for she did not know how to put into words what she had to say.

Cuthbert looked up sharply. 'What about it? Go on, sis. Doesn't she want us to stay here any longer?' he asked.

'Would you be glad if she didn't?' inquired Jessica.

Cuthbert clasped his knee, which was a favourite trick of his, and said in a low tone, 'Is that what's upsetting you? Never mind, Jess. Don't you be afraid; I will manage somehow, you'll see;' and he tried to look very confident, but his face belied him.

'I never said that we were not going to stay here. What I meant was this: if we do stay here, we are Mrs Manning's guests, and it is very good of her to keep us, you know,' explained Jessica.

But Cuthbert broke in eagerly: 'But I am going to pay her back every farthing she spends on us, and more, too, when I am grown-up.'

'You can't repay a kindness by money.'

'I haven't seen much of that, nor you either,' he put in significantly. 'And you can repay money.'

'Yes, if it is lent. I mean—I can't explain very well, but if it were arranged beforehand that we were to have so much spent on us, and that we would repay it in a few years, it would be different. But even so, it is a kindness to take us in, and we are where daddy wished us to be. And, besides, there would be the interest, and you don't a bit know how much you cost, nor do I.'

'I shall find out, and keep an account,' announced Cuthbert.

'You can't, Cuthbert. Mrs Manning is the only person who could tell you that, and I'm sure she would not if you asked her. But that isn't really what I wanted to say,' said Jessica.

Cuthbert looked at her as if wondering what more disagreeable things were coming; it was not like his sister to 'bother' like this, he felt with resentment.

'I mean, we ought to pay it back now if we can,' Jessica continued.

Cuthbert looked relieved. 'Is that all? Why on earth didn't you say so at once, instead of beating about the bush like that? Of course, she can have some of what I earn. Do you think two shillings a week would be enough, because we shall want some for grub and other things, you know?' he said.

'I don't know in the least how much things cost. But I didn't mean to pay back in money. I should not like to offer it. I mean in being nice and grateful, and doing things for her,' suggested Jessica.

Cuthbert was silent. 'I'd do anything, if I knew what to do; but I'm—hanged if I do,' he said at last.

'You might try to remember not to bang doors, and to be nice when you see her, even if she does not take any notice,' Jessica told him.

'All right; and I'll go at this garden as much as I can, but I sha'n't have too much time when I start in Mr Karslake's workshop. And, I say, Jess, won't it be splendid if I get on well and earn enough to go to college to learn to be an engineer?' cried Cuthbert eagerly, dismissing the unpleasant subject, boylike.

'Yes; and I believe you will, too, because, you know, they say you have a turn for mechanics, and Mr Karslake evidently knows a good deal about it, and I am sure he will teach you a lot. I'm most awfully glad you are going to help him, because he is so nice,' said Jessica.

The church bell began to ring at this minute, and she got up. 'Will you come to church, Cuthbert?' she asked, for Cuthbert was not very fond of church-going; but he rose as a matter of course and followed her into the house, remarking as he did so, 'I suppose we ought to take these chairs in for the night; they might get damp.'

It was his first attempt at doing things and being thoughtful, and as such Jessica welcomed it.

Kezia had gone out for the evening, resplendent with her pink bow and pink roses, and there was no sound in the house; so, as there was no one to ask whether they were to go to church or not, and as it was obvious that the only thing Mrs Manning desired, so far as they were concerned, was that they should trouble her as little as possible, they went upstairs as quietly as

they could, put on their hats, and went off to church. There many a compassionate glance was cast at the two children who came for the second time to church without any older person, and who looked so lonely in the big church, where they knew no one except the Rector and his wife.

Mrs Karslake, indeed, would have been very glad to adopt them more or less, and if it had not been for Jessica's refusal of the invitation to tea, would have asked them to come and finish the day at the Rectory; but as she remarked to her husband, 'I simply dare not. The chit stands upon her dignity, or whatever she calls it, so persistently that I am afraid to make any more overtures to her.'

The Rector only smiled, and said, 'That reserve is only intense sensitiveness and shyness. We must help her to get over it in time. It is worse for her than for you.'

Mrs Karslake was of opinion that it was pride, and perhaps there was some truth in this.

At any rate, the two children walked through the crowded churchyard—for the Rector of Bowcester was an eloquent preacher and popular—quite aware of the curious looks directed towards them, and resenting the attention they attracted, especially when one lady stopped them and said, 'You are Mrs Manning's wards, are you not? Do you think she would like me to call on her? I have a boy and girl at your school whom I should like you to know.'

'Thank you. I will ask her,' said Jessica quietly, and passed on.

'Don't do any such thing. Just say you don't know when people ask you these questions. You'll only get another headache,' urged Cuthbert.

'I wish people wouldn't ask questions,' sighed Jessica.

Cuthbert laughed. 'You're like Kezia, who was so upset when she thought I knew that she had a young man that she said it was enough to make a body keep to herself,' he observed.

'I think that is what we shall have to do, Cuthbert,' said Jessica. 'You see, Mrs Manning does not like knowing people, so how can we?'

'Nonsense! I don't want to mope and be like that old thing. And why should we? We've got nothing to do with her, or whatever she does. And I'll tell you what, Jess; you will go and get ill if you worry over things like this. They're pretty beastly, I must own; but it's only for a few years, and then

you shall come and keep house for me, and we'll have a rattling good time to make up for it,' declared Cuthbert.

'I am not worrying; at least, I did not mean to worry you. I always was quiet, you know, and I can't make friends as you do,' replied Jessica.

'But you need not be so mighty stand-offish with everybody as you are,' argued Cuthbert.

Jessica was saved the trouble of replying, as they had reached The Acacias, and Mrs Manning was at the door to open it for them, having locked it when it grew dark.

'Your supper is in the schoolroom for you. Good-night,' she said coldly.

'Good-night, Mrs Manning. Thank you,' said Jessica.

'Please, Mrs Manning, Mr Karslake wants me to go and help him with some work in the evening. Do you mind my staying out till ten?' said Cuthbert.

Mrs Manning was going upstairs, but stopped on hearing Cuthbert's voice, and turned round. 'No; but you must take the latchkey and come in quietly. If you disturb me by making a noise, I shall take the latchkey away,' she said, and went upstairs.

When she had disappeared Cuthbert heaved a sigh of relief. 'That's over, thank goodness! and I shall have a latchkey,' he said with boyish delight at his independence.

Poor forlorn children, it was well for them that they were such sterling characters, for there was no one to keep watch over their goings and comings; and even as it was, Jessica felt a little fear when she saw Mrs Manning hand Cuthbert the latchkey without a word of caution about coming straight home from the Rectory. No wonder she was becoming grave beyond her years and self-contained; she was obliged to be so, poor girl, for there was no one in whom she could loyally confide. And an ultra-sensitiveness made her shrink into herself, for reasons which will appear later on.

She went as usual to Cuthbert to say good-night to him, and found him studying a text-book on engineering. 'I believe I see a little what Mr Karslake means, Jess,' he said.

'I am glad,' said Jessica heartily, and she went to bed relieved.

CHAPTER VI.

JESSICA'S COURAGE.

EARLY the next morning, before it was quite light, Jessica was awakened by a tap at her door, and rubbing her eyes, she saw, to her surprise, Kezia standing with her head just inside the door. 'It's time to get up, Miss Jessica,' she said.

'What is the time, Kezia?' asked Jessica with a yawn.

'It's half-past five, Miss Jessica,' replied the maid.

'Half-past five! But I never get up at that time!' cried Jessica, in astonishment; and then, as a thought struck her, she added, 'Did Mrs Manning tell you to come and waken me?'

'Yes, miss; and I've been trying to waken Master Cuthbert, but he won't pay any attention,' Kezia replied in aggrieved tones.

'I'll waken him,' said Jessica, rousing herself, and adding, 'Fancy Mrs Manning getting up so early as this!'

'Lawks, miss! Mrs Manning ain't up; she don't get up for another two hours. But she said last night as I was to wake you up at half-past five and tell you you was to be down by six,' explained the maid.

'Very well, we will be down,' said Jessica; and when Kezia had withdrawn her head, the girl slipped on a warm dressing-gown, for it was a little chilly even though it was June, and went to her brother's room next door, where he lay in deep slumber.

'Cuthbert, wake up; it's time to get up,' she cried, giving him a shake. Cuthbert was not easy to rouse in the morning.

'Get out. Leave me alone,' was all the answer she could get.

'You must wake up, Cuthbert; it's time to get up,' she repeated, shaking him a little more violently.

At last he was roused, and sat up blinking his eyes. 'What's the row, Jess? Are you ill? Is there anything the matter?' he demanded as he became more and more awake.

'There is nothing the matter. It's time to get up, that's all. Make haste, Cuthbert. I'll race you,' she said, going off, for she knew that now he was awake he would get up, and might be downstairs before her.

She hurried back to her room and dressed as quickly as possible, for fear that Cuthbert should get down before her, and make a noise and disturb Mrs Manning.

Poor Jessica had great difficulty in winning the race. She was not used to dressing herself or doing her own hair, and made a poor business of it in her haste; and she was just buttoning her blouse when she heard the handle of her brother's door turn.

In a moment she was out in the passage, and putting her finger to her lips, whispered, 'A dead-heat.'

'A dead-heat, indeed! A dead-cheat I call it. Look at your hair. You are not going down to breakfast like that, I should hope? And your sleeves aren't done up. You've lost, and serve you right,' he exclaimed as he slid down the steep banisters and landed with a thud on the tiled floor of the hall.

Kezia rushed out of the kitchen at the sound. 'For all sakes, Master Cuthbert, don't make that noise! You'll wake the mistress,' she cried in a hoarse whisper.

'Oh, is she asleep? I didn't know,' said Cuthbert, penitent at once, for he was not an unamiable or naughty boy at all, and had a very kind heart and affectionate nature; and he added, 'What time does she get up, then?'

'About half-past seven, and quite early enough,' said Kezia.

Cuthbert looked at her. 'Half-past seven? But, then, what's the time now?' His eyes wandered round in search of a clock, but before he discovered the grandfather clock, in a dim recess of the hall, it struck six.

'Six! What on earth do you mean by getting me up at this unearthly hour, Jess?' he said in tones of deep disgust.

'It's very nice to get up early in this lovely weather,' suggested Jessica diplomatically.

'Anyway, you might have asked a fellow whether he wanted to get up, before you dragged him out of bed. I'm tired; I feel as if I had only just gone

to bed. I've a good mind to go back again. What am I to do till breakfast, I'd like to know?' he grumbled.

This was just what Jessica had been wondering, and she did not know what to say, as she did not want to tell him that it was by Mrs Manning's orders that they had been wakened at half-past five.

She was saved the trouble of answering by the apparition of Mrs Manning herself in a voluminous dressing-gown of ancient fashion. She had been aroused, as Kezia had feared, by Cuthbert's precipitous descent. 'Who made that noise? Was it you?' she asked of Cuthbert, as she stood at the top of the stairs and looked down upon the children.

'Yes. I'm sorry. I did not know it was so early, and that you were asleep,' he said, looking up at her.

'You will go to your room and remain there until breakfast, for which you will have bread and water as a punishment,' she announced; then she turned round and walked, stern and erect, to her own room.

Cuthbert stood still as if turned into stone, and then his face became crimson, and thrusting his clenched fists into his pockets, he muttered in tones of suppressed passion, 'I'm hanged if I will!'

Jessica, on the contrary, grew pale, and looked beseechingly after the gaunt form of her guardian; then she turned to Cuthbert.

'I won't; so there,' he cried. 'I'm going into this hole of a garden, and she can see me if she likes, and try to drag me in;' and off he went.

For a moment Jessica hesitated; then she went upstairs and knocked gently at Mrs Manning's door.

There was silence for a minute. Mrs Manning did not like being 'intruded upon,' as she called it, and no one ever came to her room. Jessica knocked again, and this time a voice asked sharply, 'Who's there?'

'It is I, Jessica,' she said in a gentle voice.

'I can't see you now. Go away,' said Mrs Manning.

'Please, Mrs Manning, I only want to speak to you a few minutes; it's very important, please,' Jessica wound up.

There was a moment's pause, and a sound of shutting and locking boxes or cupboards, Jessica did not know which, as she waited, wondering what secrets Mrs Manning could possibly be locking up; and then the latter said in a reluctant voice, 'Come in.'

Jessica went in, and found Mrs Manning sitting in an arm-chair by the bed. 'Well, what do you want to say that is so important? Make haste, as I do not like being disturbed when I am in this room, remember that.'

'Yes, I will remember it. I am sorry to disturb you now, but it is about Cuthbert,' began Jessica.

'I thought as much, and I may as well tell you that I will be obeyed, and he shall have nothing but bread and water for breakfast; so you may save yourself the trouble of pleading for him,' interrupted Mrs Manning very decidedly.

'I was not going to plead for him, Mrs Manning. I only thought I had better tell you that it is no good expecting Cuthbert to obey that kind of command,' said Jessica, looking straight at Mrs Manning.

The latter gave a kind of gasp and sat up straight in her arm-chair, grasping the arms for support. 'What!' she cried; 'have you come here to defy me, child?'

'No, Mrs Manning; indeed I have not. I only meant to explain to you that Cuthbert is too big to be treated like that,' said Jessica in the same gentle voice in which she always spoke.

'Is he? We will see about that,' said Mrs Manning, rising.

But Jessica came closer and stood before her. 'I am afraid we are a great bother to you, and I know it is very good of you to take us, and of course Cuthbert is a noisy boy, so perhaps it would be better for him to go away,' she said, her voice trembling in spite of herself.

'Go away? Nonsense! Who is talking about his going away? He is going to stop here and learn to be quiet,' cried Mrs Manning.

'*I* am talking about his going away, and I think perhaps it would be better,' Jessica said firmly.

'And pray where would he go?' demanded Mrs Manning.

Jessica gulped down a lump in her throat before she said, 'To sea,' and then choked back her tears.

Mrs Manning stared at the girl. 'To sea!' she echoed blankly, and then added in a queer tone, 'Do you want him to go to sea?'

'I would rather he went to sea than that he should stop here to annoy you,' the girl said firmly.

‘I don’t mean to let him annoy me. He must obey me,’ declared Mrs Manning again.

Jessica shook her head. ‘He never will. And—I don’t want to be rude, please, but I do not want him to obey you in that way,’ she said.

Mrs Manning grew pale with anger. ‘How dare you?’ she gasped, glaring at Jessica.

‘Father would not wish it either. I know you do not mean to be unkind or harsh, but it would break Cuthbert’s spirit, and I could not bear that,’ said Jessica.

Mrs Manning made a motion with her hand towards the door, but Jessica stood her ground. ‘So, if you really wish him to have bread and water for breakfast, it will be the last breakfast he will have here. He will simply go away,’ she said, turning and leaving the room with slow step and bent head.

‘Stop!’ said a harsh voice behind her. Jessica stopped. ‘Tell him I let him off to-day; but he is not to wake me up again,’ said Mrs Manning coldly.

Jessica turned round, and walking swiftly up to Mrs Manning, put her arms round her and kissed her before she had time to repulse her. ‘Oh, thank you, dear Mrs Manning! You are good,’ she said, and went off to Cuthbert, whom she found in a state hovering between indignation and dejection.

‘I’m about fed up with this, sis,’ he said as his sister joined him in the garden; and then, seeing her beaming face, he added very wrathfully, ‘What you can see to grin at is more than I can tell. I knew it wasn’t going to be a paradise, but this is the limit.’

After Jessica had left her Mrs Manning sat in her chair, her two hands grasping the arms, and a tremor came over her. Then she covered her face with her hands for a moment, and when she took them down she looked much less fierce, till, with an impatient shrug, she set her lips and went on with the work she had been doing when Jessica came in.

But Jessica had taken her first step towards softening poor Mrs Manning, though she did not know it until a long time after.

‘Mrs Manning says’—— began Jessica, smiling at Cuthbert.

But to the boy the name was as a red rag to a bull, and he interrupted impatiently, ‘Don’t mention the old idiot’s name to me! And you’re a nice sister to take her part.’

‘You are a nice, unjust brother. I was just going to give you a very nice message from her, but as you won’t let me speak of her, of course I can’t,’ retorted Jessica.

Cuthbert still looked sulky. ‘I don’t believe she could send a nice message if she tried. But what was it? Fire away,’ he commanded.

‘She says she forgives you this time, but you are not to awake her again,’ explained Jessica.

Cuthbert thrust his hands deep into his pockets and looked searchingly at Jessica. ‘What made her say it? Did she know I was in the garden?’ he inquired.

‘No; but she—knew you would not obey her,’ said Jessica, hesitating, for she did not want to tell him the whole story.

But Cuthbert was not to be put off. ‘How did she know? I believe you told her! Well, I’d as soon have faced a tiger! You are a caution, Jess—as timid as a hare one minute, and as bold as a lion the next.’

‘Tigers are not dangerous unless they are hungry,’ was all Jessica would say.

‘They mostly are at this hour of the morning; and that reminds me that I am very hungry. Jess, you are a brick! I don’t know how you worked the oracle, but you’ve saved me a sea-voyage. I had just made up my mind that not even to be with you could I stand this, but I’ll put up with anything in reason now,’ he said.

This was Cuthbert’s way of showing the gratitude he felt to his devoted sister; and though he would not own to gratitude to Mrs Manning for having caved in, as he privately considered it, he suddenly jumped up from the stone step upon which he had been sitting, and observed, ‘Those great weeds annoy me. I’m going to pull them up.’

‘Then I’ll go and get a knife and come and help you,’ said Jessica, following suit; and the two became so interested in their work—for they were both fond of gardening—that they forgot their hunger, and were surprised when Kezia came out to tell them breakfast was ready in the schoolroom, and that Mrs Manning would like to speak to them after they had finished.

Breakfast was a very simple meal, consisting of tea and bread and butter; but they were very hungry, and the loaf rapidly disappeared.

Kezia was astonished when she came in to clear away. ‘You’ve nearly ate a loaf,’ she cried, with horrified face.

Fortunately Cuthbert had gone off, so Jessica replied, ‘Did you not expect us to eat it all?’

‘It isn’t what I expect; it’s what Mrs Manning expects. But there, it’s no use talking. If you are here, you’ve got to eat—young growing folk, as I say; and she’ll have to put up with it, that’s all.’

‘Would it be much trouble to make us some porridge, Kezia? We like that with treacle; and then we should not eat so much bread,’ suggested Jessica.

‘Don’t you think I grudge it to you, Miss Jessica. Not but what that is a good thought of yours. Porridge is cheap enough, and so is treacle. Fancy your knowing that!’ said Kezia, in admiration.

‘I learnt it in my domestic economy. You can live on very little if you are economical,’ Jessica announced with a quaint air of wisdom.

‘Yes, miss, I know; but it’s not so easy. Somehow the money runs away before you know where you are, I’ve heard my mother say,’ said Kezia.

‘Let me help you, Kezia,’ said Jessica, taking some of the breakfast-things in her hand.

‘Don’t you trouble, miss; the mistress wants to speak to you. You go on, or you’ll be late for school.’

But Jessica gently insisted upon taking a trayful down to the kitchen; and then, fetching Cuthbert, she went with him to Mrs Manning, who was sitting in the dining-room, looking gaunt and stern as usual.

‘Here are two letters of introduction for you. Yours is to the head-master of the Grammar School, and yours is to the head-mistress of the High School,’ she said, handing each of them a letter, but, it will be observed, never mentioning their names.

‘Thank you,’ they said in concert, and left the room; for Mrs Manning, to avoid conversation, had turned to her desk, and was beginning to write in a book.

‘Shouldn’t have thought it would have cost much to tell us where these blessed schools are,’ muttered Cuthbert as they were going along the passage to their respective bedrooms to get their hats.

Jessica did not say anything, but she felt a little nervous. She was a shy girl, and the thought of going to a strange school all alone frightened her, but she would not say so.

Kezia came to the rescue with directions. 'They are quite easy to find, miss. The Grammar School is at the top of this street, not five minutes' walk; and the High School is a little farther on, down the first turning on the right,' she explained.

Jessica wished it had been the other way round—that her school came first; but she only thanked Kezia, and the two went off.

The Grammar School was soon reached, and Jessica said, 'Good-bye, Cuthbert. I hope you will get on all right,' and nodded to him.

'Oh, there's no hurry; it's not nine o'clock yet. I'll come and see you to your menagerie first,' he said airily, and walked on with her.

'Oh, thank you, Cuthbert; I was just beginning to feel a little frightened,' she said gratefully.

'I knew that. You're a rum mixture, Jess,' he observed with lordly superiority.

They passed groups of boys evidently belonging to the Grammar School, who looked at Cuthbert as if they guessed that he was a new boy—which, as a matter of fact, they did, the story of Mrs Manning's wards being common talk in the little town; and presently Cuthbert and Jessica came to the High School, where girls were pouring in.

'Good-bye, Cuthbert; and thank you very much,' repeated Jessica.

'Not so fast. I'm going to see what this place is like, and introduce you to the boss of the place,' he announced, coolly ringing the bell.

Jessica was divided in her mind between relief at not being left to make her entrance alone, and fear that this might be considered a liberty on Cuthbert's part. However, she knew it was no use arguing with him if he had made up his mind; so she waited for the door to be opened, and tried not to seem aware of the many curious glances that were directed at them as they stood on the doorstep waiting for the bell to be answered.

CHAPTER VII.

BOWCESTER HIGH SCHOOL.

PRESENTLY the door opened wide, but no domestic could they see, the door, of course, being worked from the head-mistress's sanctum.

While they were looking about in doubt as to what they were to do, a girl in the street outside said, 'If you want Mrs Trotter, walk straight along the passage and knock at the door facing you; she is always there at this hour;' and she passed on into the playground.

'Rotten way of receiving visitors,' grumbled Cuthbert, who perhaps found his courage oozing away; but he walked boldly along the passage to the head-mistress's room, and having opened the door for Jessica, followed her into the room.

Mrs Trotter looked up, and was evidently surprised to see Cuthbert. However, she smiled and shook hands with them both. 'You are Jessica Standish, and this is your brother, who has come to show you your way?' she said in a friendly voice. ('Not in the least stuck-up,' as Cuthbert afterwards expressed it.)

The head-mistress noted the look of relief that passed over the boy's frank countenance, a look which was reflected in Jessica's, and her manner became more motherly than ever as she added, 'It was very nice of you to come and see where your sister was going to school. I shall look upon you as a sort of guardian to her, and invite you to our sports and entertainments, if you care to come.'

'Oh, thank you; thank you very much. I should like to come awfully. And now that I know Jess will be all right here—I mean, knows her way—I think I'd better be off, as I have to get to school myself by nine,' replied Cuthbert in the frank, simple way that won him friends at once; and he hurried off with the parting injunction to his sister to 'cheer up and be a credit to him,' accompanied by a droll look at Mrs Trotter, who only nodded to him and laughed.

‘It is not many brothers who would beard the mistress of a girls’ school, to say nothing of her pupils,’ observed Mrs Trotter to Jessica when Cuthbert had gone.

‘Cuthbert does not know what shyness is,’ said Jessica quietly.

Mrs Trotter thought to herself that the same could not be said of his sister, and she found herself half wishing that it was the boy and not the girl who was to be her pupil; for, gentle and courteous though she was, she guessed that it would be difficult to get ‘any further’ with Jessica Standish.

The mistress of her class was very friendly and nice, and took a great deal of trouble to make Jessica at home, as did the girls in the playground; and the girl wondered why people talked of first days at school being an ordeal. She smiled pleasantly at any one who addressed a remark to her, and presently she had quite a circle of girls round her, attracted partly by her voice, which was a very pleasing one.

‘You have come to stay at The Acacias, haven’t you?’ inquired a round-faced girl who was hanging on in an affectionate way to another girl.

‘Yes,’ said Jessica quietly, looking with her grave gray eyes at the speaker.

She answered quite politely and readily, but somehow—they could not have explained why—the girls round felt that she did not wish to be asked any questions, and a dead silence ensued.

One or two of the group walked away, and the others looked a little uncomfortable and at a loss what to say.

This seemed to strike Jessica, for she remarked, ‘I have only just come to your town. I think it is very pretty. Are there many nice walks round?’

‘Oh yes, lovely walks over the downs, and to Bridgeham Woods, and lots of places,’ several girls hastened to assure her.

‘We’ll show you some walks, if you like,’ said a girl, emboldened by her friendly smile.

‘Thank you very much; but I do not know whether my guardian will wish me to go for walks,’ she said.

‘Your guardian? Oh, you mean that old—Mrs Manning,’ cried one of the girls, pulling herself up as she saw Jessica’s face.

‘Yes, I mean Mrs Manning. But perhaps you do not know her, for she is not very old. She is middle-aged, I think. Her hair is not even gray yet,’

Jessica replied.

'I should think we don't know her. Nobody does. She is a regular old skinflint, and won't know any one for fear she should have to give them a cup of tea,' cried a girl who was thick-skinned, and had not understood Jessica.

'I think you are mistaken. Mrs Manning is very kind and generous; and as she is my guardian, I would rather not talk about her, please,' said Jessica very quietly.

The girls melted away, and somehow Jessica found herself alone. However, she made no attempt to get them back or to talk to any of the girls who passed, but sat down under a tree, and throwing back her head, looked up at the branches above.

'Are you studying the anatomy of trees, or is there something specially interesting up there?' inquired a voice; and bringing her eyes back to earth, Jessica found that the seat beside her was occupied by a girl about two years older than herself, with a bright, mischievous face, who was looking at her with a quizzical smile.

'No. I was only thinking,' replied Jessica.

'I beg your pardon for interrupting you, then. But it's a bad thing to get too much up in the clouds; one doesn't notice what's going on round one on the earth,' observed the other.

'I wasn't in the clouds. I was thinking of what is going on round me,' replied Jessica, with an answering smile.

'Well, think about me now, will you?' demanded the new-comer.

Jessica gave her soft laugh. 'What am I to think about you, please?' she inquired, turning to look at her companion.

'Think anything you like. Think that I am nice,' suggested the girl.

'Oh yes, I am sure of that,' replied Jessica earnestly.

'Now why on earth should you be sure of that, when you don't know anything about me? Or are you only being polite?' her companion inquired.

'I think you are nice to me at any rate, because you have come to talk to me, whom you don't know,' explained Jessica.

'Oh, I did that to please myself,' argued the girl.

‘And to please me,’ added Jessica, in the grown-up and slightly stiff manner she sometimes assumed unconsciously.

‘How do you know that? I might have come out of curiosity to find out who you are, as you are a new girl, and a stranger to this town,’ said the girl, giving her a quick look.

‘I am sure you did not come out of curiosity,’ replied Jessica.

‘No? Why not, pray?’ demanded the other.

‘Because, in the first place, everybody in Bowcester, I should think, knows all about us—that we have come to The Acacias to live with Mrs Manning, because our parents are dead,’ said Jessica, unaware that a touch of scorn was in her voice at the interest people took in The Acacias.

‘And what is in the second place?’ inquired Jessica’s new friend.

Jessica again gave her low laugh. ‘In the second place, because you have not a curious face. I mean’—as the other looked amused—‘you are not a bit inquisitive.’

‘I am, begging your pardon, and there’s something I badly want to know at this minute,’ said the other, laughing.

‘What is it?’ said Jessica, and this time she did not draw into her shell and become reserved, as she had done with the other girls.

Her companion was aware of this fact, and flattered by it, and thought she would see how far she could go. ‘I want to know something about you,’ she said.

‘Well, what is it? I will tell you if I can,’ replied Jessica.

‘I want to know—if you will be chums with me?’ the girl asked.

As a matter of fact, she had not meant to ask any such thing, but only wanted to see whether Jessica would ‘shut her up,’ as the girl put it, as she had done the other girls that morning. As Jessica had not done so, she was obliged to say the first thing that came into her head.

‘That was not what you wanted to know really,’ said Jessica shrewdly.

‘Oh, my goodness! you are a positive Sherlock Holmes,’ said the girl, with a half-embarrassed laugh; and then she added, ‘Come along; the girls are getting into their ranks; and when you have made up your mind whether you are going to be friends with me or not, you can tell me.’

The other girls had not been so pleased with Jessica, and discussed her pretty freely when she had gone to sit under the tree.

'She won't stick up for that old woman so much after she has been there a little longer,' said one.

'No; nor will she think her so kind and generous when she half-starves them, as she does her servants,' agreed another.

'I think it was rather decent of her to stick up for her guardian, as she called her. I thought she was her cousin. I expect Mrs Manning can be kind if she likes, for Jessica Standish, who lives with her, says she is,' put in a third.

'She has only lived with her a few days; and, of course, she would not tell us even if she was half-starved. She's one of those proud people who'd smile while a wolf was gnawing her vitals, like that boy—I forget who.'

There was a laugh at this; but one of them said seriously, 'I believe she is that sort. I hope Mrs Manning is going to be good to them, because, though Jessica was not very gushing with us, I think she's nice.'

'Nice is as nice does. I consider she snubbed us all, and pride goeth before a fall; so you'll see she will have a nice tumble before very long,' said the first speaker.

'Her brother looks much jollier. I shall ask my brother what he is like. He goes to the Grammar School, and is about his size, so I expect they'll be in the same class,' said a girl named Edith.

And then they formed ranks; and after school they were all in so great a hurry to go home to dinner that they had no time to loiter about and talk.

As luck would have it, the brother above mentioned was kept in, and instead of going home ten minutes before the High School girls, as he should have done, according to a wise arrangement of the authorities to prevent the two schools going home together, he met his sister and her friends outside the High School.

'Hallo, Charlie!' she cried; 'what's the new boy like?'

'Oh, top hole,' cried Charlie, taking off his hat to the girls.

'Top hole! What! in games or lessons?' inquired his sister.

'In himself, to begin with. He's no end of a jolly chap, and he's A1 at his work too, and I expect he will be in games,' said the boy.

‘Then he’s above you in the school?’ said his sister.

‘Above me! I should rather think so—two forms; and he is only six months older. What’s his sister like? She looks A1 too,’ he observed.

‘Then she looks what she isn’t. She’s as stuck-up as she can stick, and snubbed us all first thing,’ said his sister Edith, with an aggrieved air.

‘Goodness! she’s not much like her brother, then; he’s as chummy with us all as if he had been at the school for a year instead of a day,’ said Charlie, looking surprised.

‘Then I wish we could swop. This Jessica won’t be chummy with us, however long she stays at the school, if she goes on as she has begun,’ said Charlie’s sister.

‘Perhaps she’s shy. I thought she looked rather nice when I met her with her brother this morning, and they were laughing and talking quite all right,’ he observed.

‘Ah, with her brother; but you should have heard her catch up Daisy when she called Mrs Manning a skinflint.’

‘Oh, well, so did young Cuthbert,’ remarked Charlie.

‘What! did you call her a skinflint too?’ inquired the girls in chorus.

‘Not I. I’m not quite so cheeky; but one young ass asked him if he hadn’t got rather a tartar to live with, and he said, “Shut up and don’t rot,” and began to talk fast about something else,’ explained Charlie.

‘Oh, well, if they both like her, I suppose it’s all right; but I’m glad I haven’t to live with her, that’s all,’ said one of the girls.

‘He didn’t say he liked her; and I’ve an idea, from his face when the fellow spoke of her, that he’s none too fond of her; but, of course, he’s not such a sweep as to tell us that,’ observed Charlie, whose vocabulary was slangy.

The party were passing The Acacias at the moment, and, as luck would have it, Cuthbert, in his excitement over his new school and companions, had run up the garden path and banged the door, before Jessica, who was watching for him out of the window, could run down and shut it behind him. Mrs Manning came out of the dining-room and scolded him violently. In her anger, she spoke so loud that the school boys and girls passing by could hear her.

Charlie walked on as if he had not heard anything; but one of the girls said, 'There, what do you say to that?'

'Nothing; and if you've any sense you won't say anything either, or you'll jolly well deserve to be snubbed,' said Charlie, walking on with heightened colour.

Meanwhile Cuthbert, mindful of his promise to his sister to put up with anything within reason, and apparently considering Mrs Manning's anger to be reasonable, muttered, 'Awfully sorry, Mrs Manning. I'll try to remember to shut the door quietly another time,' and ran upstairs before he should lose his temper.

Jessica followed him, and began to wait on him, pouring out water for him to wash his hands and giving him the towel, while she asked him how he had got on.

'Oh, A1. Our head-master is an old Blue, and most awfully nice. I was late, and he asked me why I had passed the school; so I told him, and he said then it was all right; and he's put me quite high up in the school, with fellows all older than myself.'

'I should think so. But isn't it horrid instead of Harrow, Cuthbert?' she said in a sympathetic voice.

'Poof! I wouldn't go to Harrow now if I could. I want to make money, and a commercial education is best for that,' said Cuthbert, hastily wiping his hands as he heard the dinner-bell.

Jessica gave a little sigh, which she immediately checked, saying, 'I believe it is a very good school, and so is mine; so we are really very fortunate.'

Mrs Manning was sitting at the top of the table when the two arrived, and had helped them to two very small portions of meat. Jessica looked fearfully at Cuthbert, who had a healthy appetite, and had not found his breakfast very satisfying. He soon ate up the meat, and was evidently disappointed when he was told to ring the bell.

Kezia came in answer to the summons, and gave a glance at the boy's face, but said nothing. She vanished, and reappeared with a rice-pudding, which was not very big or very appetising. Both the young people got up from the table rather hungry, and were going into the garden, where they felt freer than they did in the house, when Kezia came out of the kitchen and said in a low voice, 'You're wanted in the schoolroom, if you please.'

‘Both of us?’ demanded Cuthbert, desirous, if it were a visitor, to avoid him or her.

‘Yes, sir, both of you most partic’ler. And please to shut the door after you and keep very quiet, as we’ve got nerves in this here house;’ and Kezia disappeared into the kitchen with a sniff which screwed up her nose in the funniest way.

The brother and sister went to the schoolroom to see the supposed visitor, but found instead the cloth laid, and hot rabbit-pie and baked potatoes on the table, and facing them a sheet of paper with: ‘Please eat, and oblige your obedient servant, Kezia.’

‘Eureka! she is a trump! Come on, Jess; I can do a second dinner,’ cried Cuthbert, proceeding to prove his words.

Jessica felt a great desire to cry. She had been so miserable when she left the dining-room, knowing that Cuthbert had not had enough to eat, that Kezia’s kindness quite upset her. However, she choked back her tears, and after the pie felt much better physically and morally.

‘I say, sis, there’s one good thing about this place, and that is that we sha’n’t be worried about how we get on at school, by the look of it; so we can do as we like outside these walls,’ opined Cuthbert.

‘I don’t know that I want to do anything that Mrs Manning would object to,’ replied Jessica.

‘You wouldn’t, very likely. Girls have no enterprise,’ replied Cuthbert between his mouthfuls.

Jessica laughed. ‘I don’t call it enterprise to want to get into mischief; or, at least, it’s a foolish sort of enterprise,’ she protested.

‘It looked exactly like a ghost.’ PAGE 100.

‘If you were a boy, Jess, you’d be called a prig. However, as you are a girl, it doesn’t matter. But, I say, rabbit-pie is awfully good. I hope Kezia’s pater will often snare rabbits,’ remarked he.

‘You might buy us one sometimes. We can’t let Kezia give us things like that,’ said Jessica.

‘We’ll make it right with her one day. She shall come and be our housekeeper, and her young man shall be gamekeeper, and her father too,’ announced Cuthbert.

‘Gamekeeper?’ said Jessica, puzzled.

‘Yes; I’m going to have all those things again one day,’ explained Cuthbert.

‘Oh, I see,’ replied Jessica, and laughed.

Then she went down to the kitchen to thank Kezia. ‘You are a real friend, Kezia; and we want one very much,’ she said, clasping Kezia’s rough red arm in her two white ones, and Kezia was her devoted slave from that moment.

CHAPTER VIII.

TWO BRAVE CHILDREN.

A FEW mornings later the brother and sister were called as usual at seven o'clock, and in spite of the fact that it was drizzling, Jessica prepared to go out into the garden enveloped in an old mackintosh and felt hat which came well down over her head and hair.

'What are you going to do, Jess? It's raining,' protested Cuthbert as he watched these preparations.

'It's only drizzling, and the weeds will be much easier to pull up. And, just look, there is a rose out since we cleared that bed of weeds,' replied Jessica, pointing with pride to a rose-bush which stood in the centre of a flower-bed that had been indistinguishable from the grass a few days ago.

'Then I think I'll run over to the Rectory and borrow a spade. It's too wet to cut the grass, but I could dig up those beds round those hollyhocks and columbines,' said Cuthbert with a sudden access of energy; and off he ran. Suddenly he gave a slight start, and stared up at one of the windows; but after a moment's pause he ran on, and soon came back with a spade and another implement, which he handed to Jessica.

'Here, Jess. This is the latest thing to take out weeds with. You just stick it in, and, hey, presto! out comes the weed; and you need not stoop or anything,' he informed her.

Jessica took it with evident relief. 'What a good idea! I am glad to have it. I shall get on twice as well; and I do think weeding is the most tiring and tiresome part of gardening except grass-cutting with scissors,' she said with a laugh.

Cuthbert was digging vigorously, but after some time he rested his foot on his spade, and said in a low voice to Jessica, 'I say, Jess, did I—did I look all right this morning when I came out? I mean, was I pale or anything?'

Jessica stared at him in amazement. 'I did not look at you. Why? Do you feel ill, Cuthbert? You look quite well now,' she replied.

‘I feel all right *now*, and I felt all right then; but a funny thing happened to my eyes. I saw something that wasn’t there,’ he explained.

‘That’s indigestion. You mean you saw a black spot. You must have eaten too many cakes at the Rectory,’ said Jessica.

‘I did not do any such thing. I only had some bread and butter and one piece of cake, as it happens, because I was in a hurry to go and speak to Mr Karslake. Besides, it was something white, not black, that I saw,’ cried Cuthbert, indignant at this prosaic explanation and the accusation of greediness.

‘Something white? Where? Perhaps it was a cat or a dog,’ she suggested.

‘Then it was like the Cheshire cat which disappeared into nothing; but it gave me a horrid turn for a minute. It was at one of the windows, and it looked exactly like a ghost; and when I looked at it, it disappeared.’

Jessica listened thoughtfully. ‘What was it like?’ she asked.

‘Like a ghost, I tell you, or the head and shoulders of a ghost, dressed all in white, with two great eyes glaring at me.’

Jessica looked quickly up at the window to which he pointed. ‘Perhaps it was Mrs Manning looking out to see what we were doing. I hope she will not mind,’ said Jessica anxiously.

‘It was not Mrs Manning. It was a ghost with a white head and white face and all, and I only saw it for a second; and when I looked again, there was a white muslin curtain where the ghost’s head and shoulders had been, and I could not have seen it through that. I hope I’m not going to take to seeing things. Anyway, I feel all right since I’ve been digging, and I don’t think I shall see anything more to-day,’ announced Cuthbert, putting in his spade with renewed vigour.

‘It *was* Mrs Manning, Cuthbert; so you needn’t be afraid of there being anything the matter with you,’ said Jessica quietly.

‘How do you know? Did you see her?’ asked Cuthbert, stopping again.

‘No; but I saw the muslin curtain in that room move, so I know she must be behind it,’ explained Jessica, hoping that this would relieve Cuthbert’s anxiety about his health.

But, to her surprise, he was most indignant. ‘I’ve a good mind to stop doing her old garden! What does she mean by spying upon us? And she gave me such a fright,’ he cried.

‘Surely she has a right to look out of her own window on to her garden. I am glad she has looked and doesn’t mind, because I shall be able to feel that we are doing something for her. I really do believe we shall make this quite a pretty place if we plant a few geraniums and flowers that it is not too late to put in now,’ said Jessica.

Cuthbert rested again on his spade and took a survey of the garden, as if considering its possibilities. ‘It is not so bad as I thought it was. If we cut down those bushes there, we could make an arbour; and this grass is not so rank as I expected. I dare say she has allowed some one to cut it for his cow or something. Anyway, the first money I earn shall be partly spent on plants and things for this place. It is a pity to let it go to waste,’ he announced, shouldering his spade, as he saw Kezia standing at the door ready to ring the bell which was to call them in to breakfast.

Cuthbert was in high spirits; and Kezia had taken the liberty, as she called it, of bringing some eggs from her home. The two made a hearty breakfast, and then went off together to school, Cuthbert carrying his sister’s books for her, and raising his hat with a cheery ‘Good-bye’ when he left her at the Grammar School gate.

‘Hallo, my lord! where did you learn such grand manners?’ inquired one of the boys, with a rough laugh, coming up to Cuthbert.

‘Don’t talk rot,’ was Cuthbert’s answer; and, to his own surprise, the new-comer had nothing to say in reply.

‘He has awfully grand manners, though,’ observed another boy who had been watching Cuthbert from a distance.

‘Grand? Why, he’s got nothing grand about him. He’s one of the jolliest fellows here,’ declared Charlie Gould.

‘Anyway, there’s something about him different from the other fellows here; and I believe it’s true what some say—that they were swells before they came here. There are some Standishes in Lancashire who have a cotton-mill and are as rich as Crœsus. I shouldn’t wonder if he was one of them. I shall ask him,’ said the first speaker.

‘I shouldn’t if I were you. He’s not as rich as Crœsus now, or he wouldn’t be living with that Mrs Manning; so, if ever he had money, he’s lost it, and it must make him feel pretty bad,’ said Charlie.

The other looked obstinate. ‘I just will,’ he said. Charlie Gould had been rather a chum of his, and now showed signs of ‘chumming up’ with the new boy. Consequently he did not relish this championship of his rival, so he

went up to Cuthbert. 'I say, Standish, do you come from Lancashire?' he asked.

'From Lancashire? No; Northumberland. Why?' demanded Cuthbert, who was standing, his hands in his pockets as usual, watching a game of fives, from which he did not take his eyes as he answered.

This annoyed his questioner, who replied, 'Because there is a rich cotton-spinner there, and we thought you might be his son; you give yourself such airs.'

'What awful rot you talk!' said Cuthbert, turning on him.

'According to you, I talk rot whatever I say,' retorted the other.

'You do when you say I give myself airs. I haven't anything to give myself airs about,' said Cuthbert.

'Then you'd better eat humble-pie, and not tell your betters they talk rot,' said the boy.

'I should never think of being so rude to my betters,' remarked Cuthbert, looking full at the boy as he laid an accent upon 'betters.'

'Yes, you have. I'm your better,' said the boy.

'For goodness' sake, shut up, Best!' said Charlie Gould in a low tone of warning.

'You?' said Cuthbert, and looked the boy over from head to feet. That was all he said, but it was enough to infuriate the boy called Best, who, despite certain signs from his comrades, came close up to Cuthbert in a blustering manner.

'Yes, you,' he repeated with a sneer, 'who live with an old pauper at The Acacias, while I live at that big house there;' and he pointed out with a sweep of the hand a brand-new mansion that stood on a hill overlooking Bowcester.

Cuthbert did not follow the direction of the out-stretched hand, but stood looking with evident disgust at Best. 'You miserable blighter!' he said, and turned away.

'Take that, then,' said Best, and struck a blow at him, which, his back being turned, caught the back of Cuthbert's head.

Swift as an arrow, with a face as white as a sheet, Cuthbert swung round, shot out his fist, and laid his cowardly opponent on his back. 'That will teach

you better manners,' he said, and taking up a ball, started a game of fives.

The blow had stunned Best, who, however, got up in a minute, and was taken away by Charlie Gould.

'The brute! I'll be even with him yet,' he muttered.

'For goodness' sake, chuck it, Best! What on earth do you want to quarrel with the fellow for?' said Gould.

'He quarrelled with me. He knocked me down and half-killed me. I should think that's reason enough to quarrel with any one,' cried Best furiously.

'It was your own fault. You hit him first, and he had his back turned, too; so it was jolly mean of you,' retorted Gould.

'All right; if you turn against me to please that fellow, there's an end of it. Other people won't be so mean,' said Best, shaking off Gould's arm and walking away.

'If anybody's mean it is you, insulting a new boy for what is not his fault. A nice specimen you are of Bowcester manners,' shouted Gould after him, and then he too walked off and joined Cuthbert, who seemed in perfect good-humour, though he looked heated from his play, and a little excited.

'Hallo, Gould! Come on and have a game,' he cried cheerily.

And Charlie Gould, seeing that he did not allude to the late encounter, said no more about it.

As for Best, he found, to his surprise, that no one sympathised with him; and another boy, who overheard the remark that Cuthbert gave himself airs, observed, 'Oh, well, you are nobody to talk about that, for you are a jolly sight too fond of boasting about your old barrack on the hill, and your motors and things.'

'Perhaps you'd boast about them too, if you had them,' said Best with a sneer.

'I don't wonder young Standish knocked you down. Served you jolly well right, and saved me the trouble,' said the boy, whom the sneer had angered, as he left him.

As for Cuthbert, he seemed to have forgotten all about his passage of arms with Best, for as they went into school he said to him casually, 'Have you a Latin dictionary handy, Best? I want to look up some words. I had not

time to finish my construing before I came away, and my dictionary is too big to cart about.'

'Yes, in my desk. I'll give you it when we go in,' replied Best, with an awkward attempt at geniality, the fact being that he was too taken aback to have time to assume a haughty demeanour. Fortunately he did not see the smiles exchanged by the other boys behind his back at this second victory over him by the new boy, who answered pleasantly, 'Thanks awfully.'

Charlie Gould was walking home by himself, when another boy caught him up and gave him a hearty slap on the back. 'A penny for your thoughts, Gould; that is, if you'll sell them for so little. They seem profound ones, by the look of you.'

Charlie Gould gave a slight start, as well he might at the rough greeting, and replied with a laugh, 'You're welcome to them for nothing, for I don't think you'd give me a penny if you knew what they were.'

'I'll stand you a jam-tart on chance. Come on,' said the other, linking arms and turning with his companion into a tuck-shop much frequented by the Grammar School boys.

Gould solemnly munched his tartlet, with a low bow of thanks to the other, who remarked, 'I'm glad you like it; but how about the penn'orth of brains?'

'I'll finish this first in case of accidents,' said Charlie, warding off with his hand an attempt on the part of the giver to snatch his half-finished tart from him; and then, as he hastily swallowed the last morsel, he continued: 'I was thinking about young Standish.'

'Young Standish!' echoed his friend. 'What in the name of wonder could you be thinking about young Standish that made you look so serious? I call it a regular take-in. I thought you were planning a new aeroplane or torpedo,' he added in disgust.

'Torpedoes be hanged! Standish seems a wonderful chap. You see, he takes the lead, and makes people do what he likes, just as if he were born to command; and yet he never orders people about. It's just a way he's got,' explained Gould, rather lamely, it must be owned.

'It's funny you should say that, because I was thinking this morning, when the First Form master came out, that Standish has better manners than we have. You know we rather rot Mr Adams. Some of the fellows hustled him, and young Standish put out his arm to make a way for him, and just

touched his hat as if—well, as if he were used to showing fellows how to behave.'

'And they say his sister is beastly polite too,' remarked Gould.

'I expect they've come down in the world, and they have got the good sense not to say so,' suggested his friend. 'I hate people who are always talking about what they've been used to.'

'I expect that's about it. Ah, there's young Standish.—We were just talking about you,' said Gould as he saw Cuthbert.

'No harm, I hope. I made rather an ass of myself knocking down young Best; but he put my back up,' remarked Cuthbert, who looked heated, though it was not a hot day.

'You only gave him half what he deserved. We weren't talking about that. We were wondering'—— said Gould, and stopped short.

'Wondering what?' said Cuthbert, and then added, 'Who I was, and who my father was?' and he looked very grave.

'No, no; at least, not exactly,' said Gould hastily, and colouring; for when Cuthbert had been asked this question the first day, he had answered that his father was dead, and he would rather not talk about it, if they did not mind.

'We thought you had been a swell, and that you didn't want to talk about it; and jolly sensible, too,' said the other boy, coming to the rescue with brutal frankness.

'I don't know about being a swell. *I'm* not any one in particular; but—you've been jolly decent to me, you fellows, and I'd be awfully obliged if you'd go on being decent, and not talk about my father. He was an awfully good sort, and—we had more money then; so you are right about that,' said Cuthbert, speaking in a slightly embarrassed tone.

'Right you are,' said both of the boys very heartily; and they kept their word loyally, and made the other boys follow their example; so that Cuthbert never had any bother about his supposed past riches.

'Jess,' Cuthbert cried the moment he got home and into the schoolroom.

'Well?' she replied, looking up from a book she was reading.

'I say, I wish you'd get a potato or something for my head,' he observed.

Jessica looked up quickly. 'Why? Have you hurt it?'

‘No; but another boy did, and it’s swelling up,’ said Cuthbert.

‘The horrid wretch! Where is it? Show me,’ cried Jessica.

‘It’s nothing to worry about; only it’s a bother when I put on my hat,’ explained Cuthbert, gently rubbing the place.

‘I should think it is swelling up! What a wicked boy! I hope he will be punished,’ cried Jessica indignantly, as she got some lotion to put on Cuthbert’s bruise.

‘He’s been punished already, so don’t fret about that,’ said Cuthbert.

‘I’m glad of it. What did they do to him?’ asked Jessica, bathing the bruise as she spoke.

‘They? Who do you suppose punished him but me? We don’t go like babies crying to our master,’ exclaimed Cuthbert.

‘Then you’ve simply been fighting, and I call it very disgraceful; and I’ve a good mind not to go on bathing this place any more,’ said Jessica very severely.

‘That’s just like a girl. You jump at a conclusion without listening to any of the facts. I didn’t fight at all. In the first place, he was smaller than I, and I don’t fight boys who are not my size. I simply knocked him down,’ protested Cuthbert.

‘And you don’t call that fighting?’ cried Jessica.

‘No, certainly not. Not a proper fight, at least,’ argued Cuthbert.

‘There isn’t such a thing as a proper fight, and I can’t see the difference between knocking down a boy who is smaller than you and fighting him,’ objected Jessica.

‘That’s because you are a girl,’ said Cuthbert with lofty disdain.

But Jessica’s attention was much more occupied in reducing the bump on Cuthbert’s head than in defending herself or her dignity, and she saw, though he made light of it, that the blow had given him a headache.

‘Such a bore—my first day in Mr Karslake’s workshop,’ he remarked; and Jessica knew it was the headache, not the appearance of the bump, that he minded.

However, after tea he insisted upon going off to the Rectory, despite Jessica’s suggestion that he should send an excuse.

‘A fine beginning that would be, to funk just because I had a bump on my head!’ he observed, choosing a soft cap that would go on without hurting.

‘If your head gets worse you had better stop at home, Cuthbert, or you may make some muddle about the machinery, and that will be worse than not going at all,’ Jessica warned him.

‘I shall be like Brer Rabbit and lie low. And you look as if you had a headache too, so if I were you I’d go to bed. Anyway, don’t wait up for me, because this may be a long evening, and then I sha’n’t be home till ten. Good-night in case;’ and he came up to Jessica and kissed her.

CHAPTER IX.

A SCHOOLBOY'S HONOUR.

WHEN CUTHBERT thought he was safely out of sight of his sister he put up his hand to the lump at the back of his head and felt it, rubbing it gently as he placed his cap at an angle which made him look rather rakish.

As a matter of fact, Jessica did see him, for she watched him go out of the gate, and murmured, 'Poor Cuthbert!' She knew his head must be aching pretty badly if he could not bear his cap to touch the place.

'Ha, Cuthbert! here you are. I'm glad you have come. Monday is my best day for work in the workshop, because it is my holiday from parochial work—more or less, that is to say,' said the Rector cheerily.

'Generally less, or not at all a holiday,' put in his wife, shaking hands with Cuthbert.

'And now let us go to the workshop, and I will show you what I am trying to do to-night. I've been working at it for several hours already, but it won't go. Perhaps with your help I may manage it,' said Mr Karslake, as he got up and led the way to the workshop, which was really a room leading from his study into the back garden, where a shed contained abortive attempts at machine-making.

He set Cuthbert to work at an engine, which he was to try to make run, while he returned to the lounge to fetch a book he had forgotten. He found his wife sitting there looking worried.

'Edward,' she said, 'I'm quite sure that boy is starved.'

'Yes, dear, what did you say?' inquired her husband absent-mindedly, as he searched in the bookcase for the book he wanted.

'I said that Cuthbert Standish was starved,' replied his wife, this time with considerable emphasis.

‘Eh? What? Cuthbert starved?’ cried the Rector, looking startled for the moment, then adding, when he had considered a little, ‘Why, what nonsense! He dined here yesterday, and had tea too; and even if he had not eaten anything to-day, he would not be starved.’

‘I should be starved if I did not eat anything for a day; and he does not look a bit well, nor is he so cheery as usual; and it’s simply because he is hungry, poor boy! Oh, it is horrible, horrible to think of!’ cried Mrs Karslake, clasping her hands as the tears came into her eyes.

‘Really, my dear, I do hope you are mistaken,’ cried the Rector, looking perturbed. ‘To be sure, he does not seem quite so enthusiastic about the work as he did yesterday, but he may be tired after school. I don’t know what we are to do, but you might send me in my after-dinner coffee as usual, and a cup for him and some cake or a sandwich.’

‘What’s a cup of coffee and cake for a growing boy? Besides, it’s only half-past five now, and we don’t dine for two hours yet, and he will be past eating by then,’ protested Mrs Karslake quite sadly.

‘Tut, my dear! no boy is ever past eating. But if he really is not fit for the work, perhaps I had better send him home, and tell him to come to-morrow,’ said her husband.

‘On no account,’ exclaimed Mrs Karslake. ‘We arranged that I should send him in his supper on your long evenings, don’t you remember? And if he’s hungry to-day, he would be hungrier to-morrow; so we had better feed him as much as we can.’

‘He must have some food daily, Christine, and though it may not be plentiful, I should think there is enough to eat at Mrs Manning’s. We really all eat more than we need,’ argued her husband.

‘Speak for yourself, please. I beg to remark that I have a small appetite and do not overeat, except perhaps strawberries,’ protested Mrs Karslake.

Mr Karslake laughed. ‘I did not mean to insult you, my dear. But now I must go back to the workshop. I shall try to sound Cuthbert and see if there really is not enough food at home; and if that is the case, of course something must be done,’ he said.

‘He won’t tell you, even if he has had nothing but a crust of bread. They say that he stands up for his guardian when any one says anything against her; but, of course, that is just gentlemanly feeling. He is a thorough little gentleman,’ replied Mrs Karslake.

‘Well, Christine, have a little patience, and do not run away with an idea; for it is only an idea that he is starved. We will manage to give him a meal a day here, and with that to supplement the spare diet of The Acacias, he will do very well,’ observed Mr Karslake, going off.

Mrs Karslake was obliged to content herself with ordering a specially tempting pudding for Cuthbert’s benefit; and Mr Karslake returned to the study to find Cuthbert sitting near the little engine with his head on his hand. He jumped up quickly when Mr Karslake came in, and said, ‘It’s still going, sir; but it doesn’t work very smoothly. I think there’s something wrong here;’ and he began to explain what he thought was amiss; to which explanation the Rector listened with interest and pleasure at having found such an intelligent helper.

‘I believe you are right, my boy. But are you sure that you are feeling well? You don’t look quite fit to-day, and you must not let me work you to death over my hobby,’ said Mr Karslake, putting his hand kindly on Cuthbert’s shoulder.

‘Oh no, you won’t do that; this is as good as play to me. I’ve got a bit of a headache to-day, but it isn’t anything. Only it makes me a little stupid,’ replied Cuthbert.

‘A headache! What’s given you a headache?’ inquired the Rector, looking keenly at the boy, who coloured.

‘Oh, nothing; nothing particular. I’d rather not say, if you don’t mind,’ cried Cuthbert, and began to speak rapidly about the piece of machinery that did not work well.

The Rector said no more, but listened to Cuthbert, and discussed the engine with apparent attention; but he was thinking more of Cuthbert than of his hobby, and came to the conclusion that his wife was right, and that the boy really had a headache for want of food.

But, as his wife always said with an envious sigh, Mr Karslake invariably did and said the right thing, and so he now carefully avoided asking further questions or showing any sympathy with Cuthbert, lest the boy should think he had guessed the cause of his headache, and resent his pity.

Moreover, not even his wife knew that this sudden renewal of his spasmodic work at his machine was due to a desire to employ Cuthbert and see something of the boy, so tactfully did he make it seem that it was a great and necessary help to him.

True, he was very fond of making machinery; but he seldom spent more than one or two evenings a week at it, and often did not enter his workshop for weeks together. And it was true, too, that Cuthbert seemed likely to prove very useful; but he would have been employed just the same if he had not been of any use at all.

An hour went by, and the two were engaged at different parts of the room, when Mr Karslake heard a kind of gasp, and saw Cuthbert sway and fall forward, providentially away from the engine.

Mr Karslake sprang to the boy's assistance, and finding that he had fainted, rang for help.

Mrs Karslake heard the bell ring violently, and putting down her book, hurried to the workshop; for, having a woman's terror of machinery, of which she did not understand the working, she had jumped to the conclusion that either her husband or Cuthbert had injured himself with it. She gave a cry when she saw Cuthbert lying on the floor. 'Oh Edward, is he dead?' she exclaimed, for the boy looked very white, and there was a bluish tinge about his lips.

'No; he has only fainted. Get a little sal-volatile, Christine,' said the Rector as he knelt by the boy.

Mrs Karslake fetched the sal-volatile, and gave Cuthbert a dose. He swallowed it with a gasp, and opened his eyes.

'What's the matter? Where is Jessica? Oh, I remember! I beg your pardon, Mrs Karslake. I'm all right now,' he cried, trying to get up, but putting his hand to his head.

'I expect the engine made you ill, nasty noisy thing!' cried Mrs Karslake as she smiled at Cuthbert.

'No. Oh no, really it is not that. I had a headache before I came, and Jessica wanted me to stay at home, but I wanted to come,' explained Cuthbert, standing up and trying to laugh.

'Well, dinner's ready, so you can both come and have some, and go back to your work afterwards. We will excuse dressing or anything,' said Mrs Karslake.

'Dinner ready!' cried Mr Karslake, for it was barely seven o'clock. Then, guessing that it had been put earlier on purpose, he remarked, 'Time flies when I am in my workshop. Come along, Cuthbert; let us wash our hands, and clear our brains with fresh air and food, and then come back.'

‘Thank you very much, but I would rather not have any dinner,’ replied Cuthbert.

‘Oh, do come!’ cried Mrs Karslake; and Mr Karslake added his entreaties.

‘I could not eat, thank you. My head is rather bad really, and, if you don’t mind, I think I would rather go home,’ persisted the boy.

‘Very often a headache can be cured by eating, especially if it is a nervous headache. I know mine are,’ said Mr Karslake.

‘Come and try; and if you don’t feel better after the soup, you shall go,’ suggested Mrs Karslake.

So Cuthbert was obliged to give way; but though he tried out of politeness, he could not swallow the soup, and half-way through the dinner Mr Karslake had pity on him, and said, ‘Don’t stop if your head is bad. We shall finish that experiment to-morrow evening if you feel better.’

‘If you will excuse me, I think I shall go to bed. It’s very rotten to be so stupid, and I never had a headache in my life before,’ said Cuthbert, rising.

Mr Karslake came into the hall to show him out, and noticed the care he took in putting on his cap, and in consequence saw the cause. ‘Hallo! Why, what have you done to your head? Have you had a fall?’ he asked.

‘No, sir; it’s only a bump,’ said Cuthbert, trying to go off without giving further explanations.

But Mr Karslake felt that this was a subject into which he could and should inquire, and putting his hand on Cuthbert’s arm, he drew him back into the lighted hall, and said, ‘Let me have a look at it. A bump is sometimes an awkward thing, especially when it makes one’s head ache so much that one faints;’ and he examined it.

‘It’s nothing, sir, really. Please don’t say anything about it,’ Cuthbert urged earnestly, and beginning to get excited.

‘You may trust me, my boy; but I should like to know how long ago you did this. Was it to-day?’

‘Yes; this morning. I had a bit of a scrum with another boy, but I’d rather not say anything about it,’ said Cuthbert.

‘This has been done by some hard substance. Did you fall against something?’ asked Mr Karslake; and then, as Cuthbert remained silent, he said, ‘Tell me as if I were your father, Cuthbert.’

‘I should not tell my father what happened at school,’ said Cuthbert.

Mr Karslake smiled. ‘If that is all, you may be sure I shall hear all about it from other boys; so you may as well tell me yourself,’ he urged.

‘A boy hit me because I said something he did not like; but I knocked him down, so we’re quits, and I dare say he has a headache too,’ replied Cuthbert with a laugh.

‘No boy’s hand did this; he must have had something in it,’ remarked Mr Karslake, still looking at Cuthbert’s head.

Cuthbert did not say anything, and Mr Karslake let him go, saying, ‘Well, good-night, my boy. I hope your head will be better to-morrow.’

‘Good-night, Mr Karslake. I’m sorry I frightened you and Mrs Karslake. Thank you for your kindness,’ said Cuthbert, and he went off, leaving his cap on the table.

‘We were wrong after all, Christine,’ said her husband when he rejoined his wife at the dinner-table.

‘Wrong about what, Edward? What a time you have been saying good-bye to Cuthbert! You always say women’s adieux are interminable, but you men are just as bad,’ protested Mrs Karslake, taking the cover off the dish.

‘I had something important to speak about,’ said he.

‘So have we when we talk. And now your dinner is cold,’ she objected.

‘I wanted to get to the bottom of Cuthbert’s headache, and I did; so it was worth while letting my dinner wait,’ he argued.

‘We knew all that before. The poor boy is starved,’ declared Mrs Karslake, ‘and it made him faint and gave him a headache.’

‘Not at all. He has had a nasty blow on the head, and that was why he fainted,’ explained her husband.

Mrs Karslake stopped in the middle of helping her husband to the pudding she had had made for Cuthbert, and cried, ‘But that is very serious, isn’t it, Edward? How did he do it?’

‘He won’t tell me, I’m sorry to say,’ remarked he.

‘And you call that getting to the bottom of the headache? I call it getting to the beginning. I suppose that dreadful woman opposite hit him,’ declared Mrs Karslake.

‘No, it was not she; it was a boy at school,’ Mr Karslake hastened to reply, for he did not want his wife to suspect Mrs Manning of this misdeed.

‘I thought you said Cuthbert would not tell you how he did it?’ said his wife, looking at him with surprise.

‘Well,’ said her husband, coming to the conclusion that he had better tell her the whole story so far as he knew it, as otherwise he was aware that she would exercise her fertile imagination in suspecting all sorts of things —‘well, he told me that much because I forced it from him, but he said a boy at school hit him in fair fight.’

‘And why don’t you believe it?’ asked his wife, wondering. ‘I should say that was the true explanation of the whole matter; and it is, in one way, a relief to me, because you can cure a bump on the head easier than systematic starvation. But the boy can’t be as strong as he looks, or he would not faint from a blow on the head,’ she said lightly.

‘That is just the point, Christine. But if I tell you what I think, you must give me your word not to speak of it to any one,’ said Mr Karslake, who looked very grave.

‘I promise, Edward,’ said Mrs Karslake, sobered at once.

‘That blow was never given by a boy’s hand unless it had something pretty hard in it; but when I said as much to Cuthbert he would not answer. So he evidently knows that, but persists in talking of it as an ordinary fight, which it certainly was not,’ said Mr Karslake.

‘What a mean thing for a boy to do! I wonder who it was. But you need not look alarmed, Edward; I am not going to ask any one. It must have been done from behind, because I did not see it from in front,’ said Mrs Karslake, who was very quick-witted.

‘Yes; it is a good thing it was not a little nearer the temple. As it is, I am not at all sure that the boy will not have concussion of the brain,’ said Mr Karslake.

‘Oh dear, Edward, what will he do if he is ill at The Acacias, with only that woman to look after him?’ cried his wife, in great distress.

‘That maid Kezia seems a kindly woman,’ said Mr Karslake.

‘I wish I had known! He should not have gone home to-night,’ declared Mrs Karslake.

‘Then it is just as well you did not know, for we should have had no right to keep him here,’ remonstrated her husband.

‘You can’t go by right in things of that kind,’ said Mrs Karslake.

Her husband laughed. ‘You certainly can’t go by wrong,’ he retorted.

Cuthbert meanwhile went home, to find Jessica sitting in the schoolroom learning her lessons. He sat down in one of the arm-chairs and leant his head against the back of it, and Jessica came quietly up to him, and laid her cool, soft hand on his forehead.

‘Is it worse, Cuthbert?’ she said in her gentle voice, which, though he was not aware of the fact, always had a soothing effect upon him.

‘Yes, you were right, sis, as you usually are; I ought not to have gone. I only made an ass of myself,’ replied Cuthbert, as he shut his eyes and let Jessica gently stroke his head and forehead.

‘I expect Mr Karslake guessed it was your head, and would not blame you for not being very bright. Did you make any mistake?’ inquired Jessica.

‘Oh, I did the work all right; it was quite easy. But I made one mistake. I fainted,’ said Cuthbert.

‘Oh Cuthbert, was it as bad as that?’ cried Jessica.

‘Pretty bad. And then they tried to make me eat dinner, but I couldn’t, and— — Oh dear! my head does feel so funny,’ he cried.

‘Come to bed, Cuthbert,’ said Jessica gently.

‘All right; but I must fetch my cap first,’ said Cuthbert.

‘Never mind your cap, dear. I’ll get it,’ urged Jessica.

‘You can’t; it’s at the Rectory. I won’t be a minute,’ declared Cuthbert.

Jessica never opposed Cuthbert when he was what she called ‘obstinate;’ but she stood at the door looking after him anxiously, and did not leave it when she saw the Rectory door shut after him, for she felt sure he was very poorly, though he insisted upon making light of it.

After a quarter of an hour the Rectory door opened, and Mr Karslake came down the garden and crossed the road. Jessica could wait no longer, but went swiftly to the gate to meet him. ‘What is it, please? Is Cuthbert ill again?’ she asked, clasping her hands in her anxiety, and lifting her gray eyes to the Rector.

‘Yes, my child. I think he has slight concussion of the brain, and we have put him to bed. I came over to explain it to you and Mrs Manning,’ replied Mr Karslake.

‘Oh, may I go to him, please?’ asked Jessica.

‘Yes, of course. But I think I ought to see Mrs Manning,’ persisted the Rector.

‘She is in her room, and she does not like any one to disturb her there,’ said Jessica doubtfully.

‘At any rate, I can send up a message by the maid,’ said Mr Karslake; and, though she was anxious to fly to Cuthbert’s bed, Jessica went at once for Kezia to take the message.

‘Please tell Mrs Manning that Master Standish has been taken ill at my house, and has been put to bed, but that I hope he will be able to return home to-morrow,’ said Mr Karslake.

Kezia, after expressing her sorrow, delivered the message, and came down with a very red face. ‘Mrs Manning, she says, “Very well.” ’

CHAPTER X.

FRIENDS IN NEED.

THE RECTOR of Bowcester was not slow of comprehension as a rule, but this evening he stood and stared silently, almost stupidly, at Kezia when she brought back the curt reply from Mrs Manning.

Kezia screwed up her nose with a sniff. 'That's what she said, sir; so there ain't no call to trouble about her, which a stone would be softer nor her heart. But there, I'll come and sit up with Master Cuthbert to-night. I'm wiry, if I'm small, and it won't make no odds to my work in the daytime.'

The anger which had blazed in the Rector's eyes for a moment died out as he looked kindly at Kezia. 'Thank you, Kezia; that is very good of you, but Master Standish is not so bad as all that. However, as his sister will probably be anxious about him, I think she had better sleep at the Rectory too; so, if you will kindly bring over what she may require for the night, we shall be very much obliged,' he said as he went off.

Jessica stayed behind for a moment. 'You *are* kind to us, Kezia. Thank you so much,' she began.

'Don't speak of it, Miss Jessica. I'd like to know who could be anything else if they hadn't a heart of stone,' retorted Kezia.

'Don't, please, Kezia. You see, I want to like her, and to make her like us; and we are a great trouble to her, you know,' replied Jessica.

While Jessica was speaking they heard a sound behind them, and, turning quickly, they saw Mrs Manning disappearing up the stairs, at the bottom of which they stood.

The two gave a startled glance at each other.

'Wherever did she come from? I left her in her room, and heard the door locked behind me. Do you think she heard us, miss?' demanded Kezia, rather scared.

‘I don’t know. But we can’t help it now; and if she sends you away, the Rector will give you a character,’ replied Jessica sympathetically.

‘Character!’ exclaimed Kezia, with another of her characteristic sniffs. ‘I’m not afraid of wanting a character when I leave here. No more am I afraid that she’ll give me notice—she knows better.’

‘Then I think I’d better go and see Cuthbert; and, Kezia, if you see Mrs Manning, tell her where I have gone, and that I did not like to disturb her to ask leave;’ and so saying, Jessica went off.

Kezia waited a little to see whether Mrs Manning was going to reappear; but, finding all was quiet, she ‘slipped over,’ as she called it, to the Rectory to hear the latest of the invalid, and incidentally have a chat with cook.

‘What have you been and done to our young gentleman?’ she demanded of cook, out of whom she never could resist ‘getting a rise,’ if possible.

But cook was quite a match for her, and replied, ‘That’s what you’d better look at home to find out. All he does is to come over here and faint away and be nursed up; for which you’d do well to be grateful, Kezia Cocker, ’steads of throwing sarcasm at un,’ wound up cook, lapsing into dialect as she warmed up.

‘There’s no one done nothing to him at The Acacias, as I can answer for, which he hasn’t been there above an hour or two to-day, for one thing. But you always were one to back-answer,’ retorted Kezia.

‘Well, something’s happened to the poor lad, and ’tisn’t for us to be joking like about it, with him perhaps even now passing away,’ observed cook.

Kezia gave a gasp. ‘Is it as bad as all that?’ she asked, shocked at this pessimistic view.

‘There’s no knowing. The doctor is there now, and the master and mistress are in a great taking about him,’ announced cook.

‘Is that Kezia?’ said a voice, and Mrs Karslake’s bright face was seen at the kitchen door; and she added, ‘Good-evening, Kezia. I thought I recognised your voice, so I came to ask you to fetch Miss Standish’s things for the night, as I think she had better stay here till to-morrow.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ said Kezia in a subdued voice, and went off to do her bidding.

Mrs Karslake was at the door waiting for Jessica. ‘He is fast asleep, Jessica. I expect he will be better to-morrow,’ she said as the girl came in.

‘What has happened, please? Did he faint again?’ asked Jessica.

‘No, no; only he seemed ill, and we persuaded him to go to bed here instead of returning home,’ explained Mrs Karslake.

‘It is very kind of you, and I am afraid we are giving you a great deal of trouble,’ said Jessica.

‘Not a bit. We are used to people dropping in for the day or the night, and we are very glad to have you both. You would like to see Cuthbert before you go to bed, wouldn’t you?’ said Mrs Karslake.

‘Yes, please. But I won’t go to bed, thank you. I will just sit in an arm-chair in his room, if you don’t mind,’ said Jessica.

‘Oh, but there really is no need for that,’ cried Mrs Karslake. ‘There is a bedroom next to the one Cuthbert is in, and you could sleep there, and keep the door open between you.’

The Rector led the way upstairs, and pushed open the door of a room on the square landing.

Jessica looked into the room, and saw Cuthbert apparently sleeping soundly, while a night-light burned beside him, and an electric bell was within reach. She trod softly to the bedside and bent over her brother, and then turned and left the room.

‘What is it?’ she said in a low voice to the Rector when they were outside the door.

‘He has slight concussion of the brain,’ he replied.

‘Do you know how he got it?’ asked Jessica, looking at Mr Karslake to see how much he knew.

‘Yes; it was from a blow on the head,’ answered he.

‘Please tell me what the doctor says. Is it serious? I would rather know the truth,’ pleaded the girl.

‘The doctor says that he cannot tell yet, but he hopes it will be a slight attack, and that Cuthbert will be all right in a few days. But he must keep quiet for a while. Will you allow us to keep him here for a week or two? And you too, if you will come?’ asked the Rector in his kind and courteous way.

‘You are very, very kind, and I am sure Cuthbert will be very pleased to stay with you; but I think I must stay at The Acacias,’ said Jessica.

‘Then we shall expect to see you every day, and I am quite sure Cuthbert will want as much as possible of you. And now I will send Mrs Karslake up to show you your bedroom,’ he remarked, as he said good-night to Jessica.

Mrs Karslake came up and busied herself arranging everything as comfortably as possible, trying, in fact, to mother Jessica; but never was there a less responsive daughter, and yet she was so gentle and politely grateful that Mrs Karslake could not feel hurt, though she longed to break the stony reserve.

Kezia arrived with Jessica’s dressing-case, saying, ‘I have put in soft slippers and a dressing-gown, miss, in case you want to get up to Master Cuthbert; and if you will only say the word, I’ll slip back and lock up, and come and sleep in a chair, ready if you want me; and the missus need never know a word about it.’

‘Oh no, thank you, Kezia,’ cried Jessica, rather shocked at the idea of deceiving Mrs Manning. ‘It is very kind of you, but Mr Karslake says there is no need for any one to sit up with Cuthbert; there is no danger;’ and Jessica’s lip trembled at the very thought, though she continued after a moment with a hopeful smile, ‘And I dare say we are making more fuss than we need. Good-night, Kezia. If Mrs Manning asks about me, say I am with my brother.’

Mrs Karslake said good-night, and went downstairs too. ‘Edward, I feel as if I wanted to sit by a warm fire, or have a very hot drink,’ she announced to her husband, whom she found reading by the light of a reading-lamp in the hall lounge.

He raised the shade to see her more clearly, and said in anxious tones, ‘My dear, what is the matter? Have you caught a chill, or is it nerves? You can’t possibly be cold this warm evening.’

Mrs Karslake laughed heartily, and then checked herself as she bethought herself of Cuthbert. ‘It is my heart that is chilled,’ she explained.

‘That won’t remain cold long, Christine,’ remarked her husband with an air of relief.

‘It won’t get warm while Jessica remains the iceberg she is. I never in all my life came across such a cold little person,’ protested Mrs Karslake a little crossly.

‘She is not in the least cold. Her devotion to her brother is quite touching. She is a perfect little mother to him, and one can see that she is putting great restraint upon herself not to break down at the thought of his being ill, and perhaps in danger. It is a very hard position for them, poor children—terribly hard; and I can only be glad that we are allowed to be of some comfort to them,’ replied the Rector.

‘We may be some comfort to Cuthbert, but you can’t comfort a sheet of iron. She may be very affectionate and soft to her brother, but she has cased in iron the side she turns to us,’ grumbled his wife.

‘Have a little patience, Christine. It is not iron or ice; it’s only a stiffened skin, and shyness. She has to brace herself to bear’—Mr Karslake paused, and added, ‘the responsibilities of her present life, and you must bear with her coldness.’

He said nothing of Mrs Manning’s callous message, though it was of that he had thought in the pause he made; but now he felt pity for the woman who had somehow become so warped that she could treat a child in such a way, more especially one to whom she was a guardian.

The Rector sat in the hall lounge for a long time after his wife had gone to bed, debating in his mind whether he ought to go and remonstrate with Mrs Manning upon her behaviour towards the children, and try to bring her to a sense of her duty to them. He even thought of threatening to take them away on the plea that they were neglected. But he finally decided that he would do nothing before speaking to Jessica, in whose good sense and judgment he had more confidence than in many a grown-up person’s; and with this decision he went upstairs to bed, just taking a look through the door at Cuthbert as he passed. Seeing that Jessica, fully dressed, was sitting in a chair by the bed, her hand on Cuthbert’s head, he went in.

‘My dear child, I thought you were in bed long ago. What is the matter?’ protested Mr Karslake, coming up to the bed to see if Cuthbert were awake, and finding him still sleeping, and not in any apparent need of watching.

‘He was restless, and put his hand to his head; so I suppose it ached, and I can always make people’s headaches better when I put my hand on their head and massage them,’ said Jessica quietly, and not moving her hand from Cuthbert’s forehead.

Mr Karslake felt the boy’s pulse. ‘I think he will sleep on now, Jessica; but in case he wakes, I shall be on the sofa here; so go to bed, and trust him to me, will you?’ he asked.

Poor Jessica did not at all want to leave her brother, and said, 'I sha'n't sleep if I do go.'

'Never mind. Obey me,' replied the Rector. 'I promise to call you if necessary.'

And Jessica, without a word, went off to her room and shut the door; but she felt so miserable at being sent away from Cuthbert that she could not at first feel grateful to Mr Karslake.

However, after half-an-hour or so, during which time she had sat, her head on her hand, listening for any sound from the next room, which remained quite quiet, she began to reason with herself, and went to bed, or, rather, lay on her bed in her wrapper, so that she could go to Cuthbert at the first sound, being convinced that she would not be able to sleep.

It seemed to her that she had just shut her eyes to rest them, for they were hot with the tears that she would not shed, when she heard the sound she had been waiting for, and sat up quickly to find the maid at her bedside with a cup of tea on a tray.

'Oh, thank you; but I must go to my brother,' cried Jessica.

'The master said to tell you that Master Cuthbert had slept very well, and there was no need to call you, miss; and please would you drink this before you went to him?' said the maid.

Jessica felt a little angry, partly with herself for having slept after all, and partly with Mr Karslake for having done without her at night, though she knew that this was quite unreasonable. She swallowed her tea, and went quickly to Cuthbert, who was awake, but complained of headache.

'It's awfully decent of the Karslakes to have us here, Jess. Mind you thank them, and tell them I'll get up and go over the way in a minute or so. But, I say, I don't believe I can go to school. Do you think I'd better ask Mr Karslake to write an excuse for me? I don't expect Mrs Manning will bother to do it,' he said, moving restlessly in the bed.

'That will be all right, Cuthbert. Don't bother about anything, but just lie still,' said Jessica.

'I must get up,' protested Cuthbert.

'No, you must not. Mrs Karslake wants you to stop; and, Cuthbert, we can't help it—you must stay here. They are very kind. And it's not your fault that you are ill; it's that horrid boy,' said Jessica a little bitterly.

Cuthbert opened his heavy eyes. ‘I say, Jess, mind you don’t say anything about that. Nobody must know. But don’t let’s talk; it makes my head so bad,’ he murmured.

‘I should like to stay with Cuthbert to-day, if you don’t mind,’ said Jessica wistfully to Mrs Karslake when she went downstairs.

‘I don’t mind at all. On the contrary, I don’t see how you can be expected to go to school under the circumstances,’ said Mrs Karslake, to Jessica’s relief.

‘Then I will go to The Acacias and just tell Mrs Manning, and come back after breakfast,’ replied Jessica.

‘Stop and have breakfast, won’t you?’ asked Mrs Karslake.

‘Thank you, Mrs Karslake; but I must go,’ said Jessica with quiet decision, and Mrs Karslake said no more.

But when her husband appeared, quite fresh after a bath and a brisk walk round the garden, she observed to him, ‘Jessica’s stiffened skin, as you call it, would not allow her to have a comfortable breakfast here, but compelled her to go and ask leave of that cold-blooded old woman to stay away from school.’

‘She was quite right. And, Christine, do not call Mrs Manning names; it does no good, and it is not right,’ he objected.

‘Really, Edward, I don’t see that I have called her any names that she does not deserve. After last night, what do you call her behaviour, if it was not cold-blooded?’ demanded Mrs Karslake.

‘I do not call it anything, and I do not see how you know anything about it unless you have been gossiping with the servants,’ said her husband gravely.

Mrs Karslake looked penitent. ‘I really could not stop Kezia, Edward. She was bursting with the desire to tell some one of Mrs Manning’s conduct, and I begged her not to talk of it,’ she said.

Mr Karslake shook his head. ‘I expect it will be Punchinello’s secret before the day is out. I only hope the cause of Cuthbert’s illness won’t get spread about too,’ he remarked.

‘It is not so likely, because only you and I and the doctor and Jessica know it, and none of us are likely to talk; and I should fancy the culprit will keep silence for his own sake,’ said Mrs Karslake.

‘I hope, for his own sake, he will speak out; but until he does we must certainly keep silence. Ah, here is Jessica coming back, but she has her school-books under her arm. I wonder what that is for,’ exclaimed Mr Karslake.

Jessica came in, looking stiffer than ever, as even her champion, the Rector, was obliged to own, and said, ‘I’ll stop with Cuthbert until it is time to go to school, but Mrs Manning wishes me to go as usual. And please would you be so kind as to explain to the head-master of the Grammar School that Cuthbert really can’t go? Mrs Manning does not understand that.’

‘Would you like my husband to go across and tell Mrs Manning that he really is ill, and that you ought to stay with him?’ inquired Mrs Karslake, acting on a kindly impulse.

Jessica looked at Mr Karslake. ‘Do you think he needs me?’ she asked.

The Rector hesitated. He would have liked, for the girl’s own sake, to keep her away from school, but he could not say it was necessary, nor did he think it wise to encourage her to oppose Mrs Manning unless it was absolutely necessary; so he replied, ‘We will look after Cuthbert for you while you are at school, so it is not really necessary for you to stay away, though I know it is hard on you. But if you will allow me, I will walk to school with you, and explain matters to the head-master myself.’

Jessica opened her mouth to say something, but shut it again, having evidently changed her mind, and went up to Cuthbert, with whom she remained until Mrs Karslake came to tell her the Rector was waiting to accompany her to school.

‘Please, Mr Karslake,’ said Jessica when they had started, ‘Cuthbert does not want people to know that the blow he got yesterday has made him ill.’

‘No; I quite understand. We must hope that the poor boy who did it will own up,’ said Mr Karslake.

‘I call him a very wicked boy,’ cried Jessica indignantly. As usual, she thawed when with Mr Karslake.

‘I would rather be Cuthbert than he; wouldn’t you?’ he asked; and as Jessica agreed, he added, ‘Then don’t you think he is the one to be pitied the most? It is easier to forgive people if one looks at it like that. And now I want to say something which I hope you will not think interfering. It is about Mrs Manning. Are you very unhappy there?’

‘Oh no, thank you. I have Cuthbert, you see;’ and Jessica smiled brightly. ‘And Mrs Manning does not bother us very much,’ said Jessica.

‘Would you rather that I did not speak to her—I mean, to try to make her a little more friendly to you?’ he asked.

‘I don’t think it would be any good. I think she does not like having us, but she promised my father, and so it is really good of her to keep her word; and I hope perhaps in time she will get to like us a little,’ said Jessica.

‘I am sure she will; and perhaps that is why you have been sent here—just to try to make Mrs Manning happier and better, for she is a very unhappy woman. But you must promise me that if you are in any trouble or in need of help of any kind, you will come to me just as if you were the little daughter who would have been nine years old if she had been spared to us,’ said the Rector.

He had touched the right chord, for Jessica answered, ‘Indeed I will. I am not like Cuthbert, who can always say out just what he feels; but I am as glad as he is that you are near us and so good to us. We could not have borne it if it had not been for you;’ and again Jessica smiled bravely.

They were at the High School door, so the Rector only said, ‘Then that’s all right;’ and handing Jessica her school-bag, he raised his hat and went to the Grammar School.

‘Concussion of the brain! How did he get that?’ asked the head-master, looking inquiringly at the Rector.

‘I believe he is the only person who could tell us that exactly, and he is not in a fit state to be asked,’ replied Mr Karslake.

‘It sounds like a blow or a fall. Do you know anything about it?’ continued the head-master.

‘I am, as I said, not in a position to give any information,’ repeated the other.

‘Well, I am sorry about it, poor boy, for he is such a nice fellow. And you say he will not be able to come to school for some weeks? In that case he will not return until after the summer holidays, and it was not worth while to have paid the fees for this term,’ said the head-master.

‘Could not the governors return them? I don’t know their circumstances, but I should fancy, if Mrs Manning is responsible, that she would be glad to be saved money,’ suggested the Rector.

The other smiled. ‘I don’t doubt it. As a matter of fact, she grumbled at the amount;’ and then checking himself, for he knew the Rector’s objection to gossip or anything that approached backbiting, he added, ‘and, for that matter, we should object to paying for half a term’s schooling and having only a few days’ worth; so I will ask the governors to refund it.’

This piece of business over, the Rector turned back and paid some sick visits; and, coming out of a house in the town, he came face to face with Mrs Manning, who looked very forbidding, as usual.

‘I am sorry to say your ward, Cuthbert Standish, is very unwell, Mrs Manning,’ he said, raising his hat.

‘So am I sorry; but I think he should have tried to go to school. Tell him I expect him to go to-morrow, please,’ she said, and was turning away.

‘I am afraid I cannot give that message, as the doctor will not allow him to go back this term,’ said Mr Karslake.

‘That is nonsense; he must go. I am not going to have him waste his time and my money,’ she retorted.

‘He will not waste either. The governors will refund the fees, with regrets at his illness; and his time will be profitably spent, as far as he is able, in practical engineering with me,’ said Mr Karslake; and again raising his hat, he left Mrs Manning without another word.

For the first time for many years the opinion of some one had an effect upon Mrs Manning, and she felt a little shame as she met the Rector’s grave, reproachful eyes. And either that, or the fact that Cuthbert’s illness was not going to cost her money, but would save it, or Jessica’s patient efforts to please her, made her more amiable to Jessica when she came back to lunch, and said, ‘Cuthbert’s head is a little better, Mrs Manning.’ She did not expect any response, and was surprised when Mrs Manning actually replied, ‘I’m glad to hear it.’

CHAPTER XI.

JESSICA'S UNPOPULARITY.

AFTER the Rector had left Jessica at the school gate her smile had faded. Her face took a weary look as she walked along the corridor, when she suddenly felt an arm put into hers.

She gave a start, and her first impulse was to withdraw her arm; but turning, she saw the same girl who had come to her the first day as she sat alone under the tree, and she gave a smile of welcome instead.

'Have you thought it over yet?' demanded the new-comer.

'I beg your pardon? What am I to think about?' asked Jessica.

'What a snub! She does not even remember my request,' exclaimed the other, with pretended melancholy.

'I do now, but I thought it was a joke; and I shall be very glad to be friendly with you, though I do not even know your name,' observed Jessica.

'My name is Ivonne Beddard, and I am the only child of my parents. They think they spoil me, but I think them a great trial,' said Ivonne, and added with a sigh and a comical look, 'We all have our trials.'

Jessica tried to laugh, but it was so forced that her companion looked into her face to see what was the matter, and discovered, to her consternation, that Jessica was very near tears, but was struggling hard not to give way. She plunged into a funny anecdote, and this time Jessica did laugh.

But just before she was parting from the younger girl at her class-room door, and saw how grave and anxious she became, Ivonne gave her a friendly pat on the shoulder, and said, 'Take my advice, Jessica, and sit tight.'

'Sit tight on what?' asked Jessica with a puzzled air.

'On life,' replied the other promptly, and laughed at Jessica's blank face. 'Yes, on life. It's wonderful how things smooth out when you sit on them,'

she repeated, and left Jessica smiling.

The form-mistress was pleased to see her grave pupil looking so cheerful, and took special pains to interest her and address questions to her to draw her out; and being a good teacher, she succeeded, for Jessica responded to her efforts, and showed more thought and intelligence than the average girl of her age.

In fact, so interested was she that for the time she forgot Cuthbert, until play-time came, and then remembering Ivonne Beddard's advice, she continued to be cheerful, though really she was counting the minutes until she could be back with him; and when twelve o'clock struck she was the first out of the school.

But by afternoon school the news of Cuthbert's illness had become known, and exaggerated reports were spread; and Ivonne's form-mistress observed to Mrs Trotter, 'That really is a most extraordinary girl. The first day that she appears cheerful is the day that her brother is lying dangerously ill at the Rectory.'

'Is he really? That nice boy! What is the matter with him?' cried the head-mistress, shocked.

'Brain-fever, so they say. It seems he went over to the Rectory about nine o'clock, and asked for his hat—evidently delirious; and so the Karslakes clearly thought, for the Rector, being kindness itself, took him in and put him to bed; and there he has been ever since, too ill to be moved, and his sister arrives at school beaming!' cried the form mistress.

'That does not strike me as being an appropriate description of Jessica,' observed Mrs Trotter. 'She has such a shy smile, and I have never seen her beam.'

'Oh, well, if you had been in the corridor this morning you would have heard her laughing very cheerfully with Ivonne Beddard, and not in the least as if her only brother were ill.'

'There must be some mistake; he seemed so devoted to her;' and Mrs Trotter looked unbelieving.

'I believe he is. They tell me the first thing he did when he came to himself was to ask for Jessica. It is she who has no heart. I said she was a cold little thing; and so she is, or she would not have come to school to-day,' said the mistress.

‘Then he has lucid moments. Perhaps they will not allow Jessica to go near him. I should like to speak to her when she comes this afternoon. Send her to me, will you?’ observed Mrs Trotter, and changed the subject.

Jessica, it will be remembered, had found Cuthbert better, and so great was her relief that she did look brighter than Mrs Trotter had ever seen her before when she was ushered into the head-mistress’s sanctum. But Mrs Trotter was not given to rash judgments, and she only smiled at Jessica as she said, ‘I am glad to see you looking so cheerful, because it tells me that I was misinformed about your brother. They told me he was ill.’

Jessica’s face clouded over, and she became a little reserved as she said, ‘Yes, he is ill, Mrs Trotter; but the doctor says he is better to-day.’

‘What is the matter with him?’ asked Mrs Trotter.

‘He has a bad headache and a little fever,’ replied Jessica.

‘Fever! It is not anything catching, I hope?’ cried the mistress.

‘Oh no; and, indeed, it is not anything very serious. The worst is that he will not be able to return to school this term, the doctor says, and that bothers Cuthbert, because he wants to get on,’ explained Jessica.

‘I think, if you can give me no better description of his illness than that, I shall have to ask Mrs Manning, as I have to be careful about epidemics, with a large day school like this,’ said Mrs Trotter, a little irritated by Jessica’s want of candour. She liked the girl, but, like other people, found it difficult to get any further with her, as her form mistress put it.

‘Cuthbert is at the Rectory. Mr Karslake knows more about him than Mrs Manning,’ replied Jessica quietly; and Mrs Trotter had a feeling, somehow, of having been put in the wrong, and felt annoyed.

‘Very well, I will apply to him. That will do, Jessica,’ she said.

Jessica knew that Mrs Trotter was vexed; but, to tell the truth, she was not pleased herself at being cross-questioned. ‘It is none of their business’ was what she thought to herself, and when the girls came round her and asked after Cuthbert, she returned such short answers, though she spoke quite politely, that her schoolfellows vowed that they would never ask after him again.

‘Not if he dies, I won’t,’ declared one girl energetically, which raised a laugh.

‘And don’t defend her any more, Ivonne,’ one of them called out to Ivonne Beddard as she passed by. ‘She is one of the most unpleasant girls I ever met.’

‘Who has fallen under your censure now?’ asked Ivonne, pausing.

‘If you mean, whom are we talking about? in plain English, we are fed up with your Jessica Standish, who seems to think it is a liberty to speak to her at all,’ they replied.

‘What has happened now? It’s a funny thing, but when I see a lot of you girls together I know you are abusing one of your best friends,’ declared Ivonne.

‘She is not one of our best friends,’ they protested in chorus.

‘We would not presume to call her a friend at all,’ added one of the girls.

‘Well, I do presume to do so, and I’ll thank you not to abuse her,’ retorted Ivonne.

‘Don’t you mount the high horse too, Ivonne. We don’t want that tone to get into the school, or it will spoil it,’ said one of the quieter elder girls.

‘I am surprised at you, Vivienne, joining the vulgar herd. Now don’t excite yourselves; it is only Shakespeare, and therefore permitted and no offence meant,’ explained Ivonne.

‘I am not joining any one in abusing Jessica Standish, Ivonne; but I do think, if any one asks you out of kindness how your brother is, you might tell her and be grateful,’ said Vivienne.

‘I don’t see why you should ask Jessica about her brother. I don’t ask girls about their brothers; and if I did, I should not mind if I got a snub,’ replied Ivonne, who, as it happened, had not heard about Cuthbert’s illness.

As may be imagined, there was a clamour of tongues as the girls all tried to tell her the supposed story of his illness. Ivonne listened in bewilderment to all the versions, and at last lost patience. ‘For goodness’ sake, be quiet, all of you, and let some one tell the story. You, Vivienne. Since when has Cuthbert Standish been ill? He was at school yesterday, and Jessica has come as usual to-day. I don’t believe a word of it. It’s just a cock-and-bull story you have got hold of, and no wonder Jessica was annoyed.’

‘Oh, but he is ill. He is away from school,’ said Vivienne.

‘What did Jessica say when you asked her?’ demanded Ivonne.

‘She said he had a headache, and had a little fever; but she hoped he would be up in a day or two, “thank you,” and then she shut her lips and walked away as if wild horses would not get any more out of her,’ related a girl.

‘H’m! I don’t see anything rude or unpleasant in that. It is very irritating to have people exaggerating things, and making out that there is something serious the matter when it is only a bilious headache,’ declared Ivonne.

‘Bilious headache, indeed! He’s just gone out of his mind, and she doesn’t want to talk of it, poor thing! And I don’t blame her,’ said a girl who had just joined the group.

Ivonne turned sharp upon her. ‘What makes you say that?’ she asked suddenly; for this was a girl who was more to be relied on than the others.

‘Well,’ replied the girl, rather taken aback by Ivonne’s abruptness, ‘I only know what I was told by some one, and she had it from the Rectory direct that young Standish went there yesterday evening looking very wild, with no hat on, and his hand to his head, and kept asking for his hat and all sorts of nonsense; and the Rector had to come out to him and put him to bed.’

‘Yes; and they say he was so violent, it took three men to hold him,’ put in another girl eagerly.

Ivonne said no more; but seeing Jessica sitting in her favourite place under the tree, she abruptly left the group and joined her. ‘Is your seat comfortable?’ she demanded, sitting down beside her and smiling.

‘Yes, thank you; at least, as comfortable as a garden seat can be expected to be,’ replied Jessica, making room for her.

‘I am not talking of anything so commonplace as this bench. I am talking poetically about the world,’ replied Ivonne.

Jessica gave her low laugh and then a little sigh. ‘It’s not quite flat just now. I’m afraid I am not very good at smoothing things out,’ she said.

‘Could I help you, do you think?’ inquired Ivonne.

‘No, thank you. No one can. At least, you do,’ replied Jessica.

‘And, to be sure, you have your brother,’ put in Ivonne.

‘But he is ill, and he is generally so bright and full of spirits that I miss him dreadfully,’ said Jessica.

'Ill! But he was at school yesterday. Is he very ill?' asked Ivonne.

'I hope not. The doctor said he was better to-day; but—but it is so dreadful not being allowed to be with him,' cried Jessica.

Ivonne misunderstood her. 'I am so sorry. Perhaps he will get over it. Oh, I wish—I do wish I could do something for you!'

'Oh, of course he will get over it. It is not so bad as all that; and he told me at lunch-time that his head was not aching so much as it did,' replied Jessica.

'But I thought you said you were not allowed to be with him?' observed Ivonne, who was getting mixed.

'I meant that I was not allowed to stay away from school, and I am not to stay at the Rectory at night, and when I am not with him I imagine all sorts of things,' said Jessica.

'Well, you must sit on them,' declared Ivonne; and again Jessica gave her musical laugh, which reached the ears of the group of girls near.

'Well, really, she doesn't care a bit. And there is Ivonne sitting in her pocket and encouraging her,' said one of them.

'Ivonne worships beauty, and Jessica is very good-looking,' remarked Vivienne.

'Well, even if I didn't care about things, I'd pretend a little, for decency's sake,' said another girl as Jessica again laughed at one of Ivonne's sallies.

'She doesn't snub Ivonne,' observed a girl.

'Ivonne has a way with her,' said Vivienne, looking a little wistfully towards the seat where the two sat, for she admired Ivonne greatly, though Ivonne did not take much notice of her.

The head-mistress meanwhile, having an hour free, went down to the Rectory to interview the Rector, or, failing that, the Rector's wife; but, to her disappointment, she was told that they were both out, and would not be home till dinner-time.

'But I understood you had a young gentleman ill here?' said the head-mistress, who began to think there was something mysterious in this illness, after all.

'Oh yes, ma'am—Master Standish; but he's better, thank you,' replied the maid, so pat that it struck Mrs Trotter that she had been coached as to

what she was to say to inquiring visitors, as indeed was the case.

And another suspicion of Mrs Trotter's was also true, and that was that the Rector had taken his wife out to pay a call some way off in the country, so as to prevent her being questioned, and induced in her usual impulsive way to say more than she ought.

'I am glad to hear he is better. Do you think he would like to see me? I like him so much,' said Mrs Trotter.

'I'm sorry, ma'am, but he has a bad headache, and the doctor said he was to be kept quiet,' replied the maid.

'What is the matter with him?' asked Mrs Trotter. She was not curious, but she felt she had a right to ask.

'A bad headache, ma'am, and some fever; but he's better.'

'Very odd,' muttered Mrs Trotter, and added, 'Please tell Mr Karslake I called to speak to him about something important, and I shall be glad to know when he can see me.'

'Yes, ma'am; and I will tell Master Standish you asked to see him. We all like him,' added the maid.

'Thank you,' replied Mrs Trotter, and turned away far from satisfied, when coming in at the garden gate she saw the doctor, who stopped to speak to her.

'What a disturbed countenance! Not measles, is it? I know an epidemic is your *bête noire*,' he said, smiling.

'That's what I should like to ask you,' remarked Mrs Trotter with some asperity. 'Who's this mysterious patient you are off to visit with that innocent face?'

'My dear lady, why this wrath? I am going to see Cuthbert Standish, who has had a blow on the head and got concussion of the brain; but as he does not want the boy who hit him to be blamed, he has asked that it should not be spoken about. But there's no mystery whatever. Why, did you think I was secreting a smallpox patient at the Rectory?' cried the doctor, laughing heartily at the relief expressed in Mrs Trotter's face.

'It's all very well to laugh, but illness is no joke; and when one is put off with ridiculous bulletins of an illness which is only a headache and some fever, and hears reports of raving lunacy, one naturally does not know what to think,' retorted Mrs Trotter.

‘Pshaw! That’s what I said—tell the truth and have done with it. All these reserves and excuses only make more talk. It is a great mercy it is only a slight attack. I was alarmed for a few minutes last night; but he is better to-day. A fine boy that. It would never have done to have lost him, especially as’ — — The doctor paused.

‘Especially as what?’ demanded Mrs Trotter.

‘Especially as he is all his sister has,’ replied the doctor promptly, and looked at Mrs Trotter.

The latter smiled in a knowing way. ‘Especially as that was not what you meant to say,’ she remarked, nodding her head.

‘Oh, if you are going to scent mysteries in everything I say, it is time I fled and paid my mysterious patient a visit,’ said the doctor, holding up his hands in protest and hurrying off into the Rectory.

Mrs Trotter also hurried, as she was due at the High School to give a lecture to the elder girls, and she was so popular that this hour was looked forward to by all in the Fifth and Sixth Forms.

As the head-mistress went into the Sixth Form class-room she met Jessica going into her class, and in spite of herself she found that a feeling of resentment was taking the place of the liking she had had for the girl. Poor Jessica was somehow making enemies for herself as fast as Cuthbert was making friends, and she was beginning to see it herself, although she did not know how she was to help it. And as it was not in Jessica’s character to ask advice from any one, she would have to stumble along by herself, and be misjudged even when she was trying to do what was right.

She was thinking matters over on her way home, and trying whimsically to act upon Ivonne’s absurd advice to sit upon things, when she became conscious that she was being followed by some one, who was apparently trying to annoy her by throwing stones. Feeling nervous, she hurried her steps, only to find that whoever it was hurried his or hers.

At last she summoned up courage to half turn her head, and there saw, to her surprise and dismay, a boy with a large stone in his hand, which he evidently meant to hurl at her.

She gave one cry, and seeing a turning out of the lane to the left, ran at full speed up it to avoid the stone, but found, to her horror, that she was in a cul-de-sac, and that her pursuer was gaining upon her. She was like a rat in a trap, with no way of escape.

Jessica looked wildly round for some place of refuge, but on one side was a high wall which skirted a nursery garden with no door opening into the lane, and on the other the hedge of a field; and even if she got through the gate, it would be no protection from this boy.

There was nothing to be done but to face her tormentor; so, brought to bay, Jessica leant up against the gate—for, indeed, she was out of breath and her heart was beating fast—and looked at the boy, who was close behind her, the stone still clutched in his hand.

'What do you want? I have no money,' she panted, breathless.

The boy gave a laugh of derision. 'I don't want money. Did you think I was a beggar? Why, I live in that big house up on the hill there, and my father has three motors,' he cried in boastful tones.

'Then why do you follow me and throw stones at me? You are a very bad boy!' exclaimed Jessica indignantly.

'I didn't throw stones at you. I just threw them at your feet to attract your attention,' retorted the boy equally indignantly.

But this did not improve matters in Jessica's eyes, though she was no longer frightened, for the boy seemed a commonplace urchin, with rather a good-natured face. 'How dare you try to attract my attention, and why have you got that stone in your hand? You kept it after you had attracted my attention,' observed Jessica suspiciously, her fears rising again; and she glanced down the lane to see if any one was coming.

The boy looked at his hand, and seeing the stone, dropped it. 'It's an awfully stupid habit I have. I like throwing stones; it's useful sometimes. But I'm going to drop it, because it's awkward too. But, I say, you are Jessica Standish, aren't you?' he asked.

Jessica drew herself up. 'My name *is* Standish,' she said.

The boy took the hint. 'I beg your pardon, I meant Miss Standish; only my sister goes to your school, and I hear her calling you Jessica. But I only stopped you to ask how your brother was.'

'My brother'—— began Jessica; and then a light dawned upon her. 'Are you the boy that hit him? But of course you are, and you are a very wicked boy,' she cried.

'I didn't do anything. I only just touched his head with my hand, and he didn't seem to feel it,' stammered the boy, taken aback by Jessica's anger.

‘Just touched his head! You hit it with a stone! You might have killed him, and he is ill in bed still, and won’t be able to go back to school this term,’ cried Jessica.

‘I’m most awfully sorry. I say, he’s not—not very ill, or—or mad, or anything, is he?’ asked the boy, his ruddy colour fading a little.

‘Mad?’ cried Jessica. ‘Of course not! And I hope he is not going to be very ill, but the doctor cannot be certain for two or three days,’ she said, her lip trembling.

‘What do you want? I have no money.’ **PAGE 159.**

The boy looked at her in consternation. ‘He’s not likely—he won’t die? I say, there’s no chance of that?’ he cried.

Jessica’s fears rose at this suggestion, and she could only shake her head sadly.

The boy came closer to her. ‘I say, he won’t peach on me, will he? And you won’t? And, look here, if—if anything should happen, my father’s

awfully rich, and he'd give you money—a hundred pounds, I'm sure—not to say anything,' he urged eagerly.

Jessica looked at the boy with horror, and then turned away.

But he followed her. 'I say, don't go off like that. Promise me not to say anything. A hundred pounds is a lot of money, and you are not rich. You could do a lot with a hundred pounds. And I'm awfully sorry about it, and you don't want me put in prison, or worse perhaps? I say, you wouldn't do that, would you? It would break my mother's heart, and it wouldn't do any good,' he pleaded.

Jessica turned on him. 'Go away, you bad, selfish boy! You don't care about anything or anybody but yourself; I will not speak to you or of you again, but there are other people who know,' she said.

'He sneaked about me!' cried the boy.

'No, he is not that kind; but no one could look at his head without seeing that it was not your hand that had done it. Cuthbert is more unselfish than you. He begged me not to tell any one,' cried Jessica, breaking her resolution not to speak to the boy again.

The boy's jaw fell as he gasped, 'They know—the stone made a mark? Then, if he dies, the coroner will have to know.'

But he spoke to the air, for Jessica had left him, and was hurrying home to Cuthbert as quickly as she could go, the fearful suggestions of Best (for it was he, it will be remembered, who had hit Cuthbert) having filled her with terror. She was so concerned about Cuthbert that she had no thought for Best or his selfish fears as to his own safety if poor Cuthbert should die.

The boy stood looking after her, and then walked down the lane, his head sunk on his shoulders; and seeing a smooth, white stone on the road, from habit he stooped and picked it up, only to throw it down again with a shudder when he remembered into what trouble this habit had got him.

What to do he did not know. He knew it would be no use trying to 'square' the Rector with hush-money, though he thought an appeal to his feelings might have some effect. But the doctor was different. He was a young and struggling practitioner, who had not long come to the town, and he had the name of being cynical and hard-hearted, though this was only because he had not much patience for nerves. Best thought he might be bought over.

The boy hesitated when he came to the end of the cul-de-sac, in doubt as to whether he should turn up the hill and go home, or go down into the town. He decided finally to pay the doctor a visit. 'I can say I don't feel all right or something. He won't mind whether anything's the matter so long as it is a patient,' he soliloquised; and he knocked at Dr Benson's door, and was shown into the young doctor's consulting-room.

Dr Benson had not very many patients, though he had many friends. He was writing an article for a medical journal which sometimes accepted his manuscripts, for he was a clever young man; so he was not pleased at being interrupted, until he was told who it was, when he immediately put down his pen, expecting that he was wanted at the big house on the hill.

'Well, Best, how are you? Nothing serious the matter, I hope?' he remarked cheerily, wheeling round on his chair.

'No-o, not much; only I thought I'd come and see you, as I feel rather—upset,' remarked Best.

The doctor shot a keen glance at him, and his disappointment was tempered by a sense of humour at this healthy patient, the cause of whose illness he shrewdly guessed. 'Upset, are you? What has upset you—too many pastries? Let me see your tongue. H'm! tongue's all right. How about your pulse? That's regular. What do you complain of?' demanded the doctor quite gravely.

'I-it's mental, I think,' said poor Best.

'Mental? That's bad. What are the symptoms? Delusions, or attacks of rage, or what?' inquired the doctor.

Best was not a bright boy, but he had a dim idea that the doctor was poking fun at him, and felt that it would perhaps be best to make a clean breast of it. 'The fact is, sir, I'm most awfully upset. But it's not my tongue, or anything of that sort; it's something that's happened that was quite an accident,' he said eagerly.

'I don't see what I can do to help you. If your nerves were "upset," as you call it, I could give you a tonic, but you seem to me to be quite fit physically,' objected the doctor, and looked longingly at his MS.

'But you can help me, sir; and I would pay you well,' cried Best hurriedly.

A light came into the doctor's eyes which should have warned the boy, if he had not been too dense and self-engrossed. 'Indeed!' was all the doctor

said.

'Yes, sir; it's about young Standish. I want to know if he is really ill—I mean dangerously,' said Best.

The doctor rose and looked severely at his young visitor. 'I do not give information about my patients to any but those who have a right to ask, and I should advise you, young man, not to make such suggestions to a respectable medical practitioner,' he said.

'But, please, I have a right to ask,' urged Best.

'You? What right, pray? You are not a relation, and I should not think you were even a friend, of young Standish,' replied Doctor Benson, with some contempt in his voice.

'No; but it means a lot to me whether he gets well or not, and whether people say nasty things about that blow he got on the head,' persisted Best.

'Oh, so it was you who hit another boy from behind with some heavy substance? No wonder you are upset,' replied the doctor with indignation.

'Didn't you know?' cried Best, in such crestfallen tones that the doctor could have smiled if he had not felt such disgust at the boy's sordid desire to save his own skin, to the utter forgetfulness of, or in indifference to, the sufferings of the schoolfellow he had hurt in so mean a way.

'You miserable coward, can't you think of any one but yourself? What do you mean by coming here and telling me you have a right to know about young Standish? You are the last person I should tell; and let me warn you that, if all should not go well with him, it will go very badly with you. And now I must ask you to go away, as I am busy,' said the doctor, taking up his pen as a hint that the interview was at an end.

'Oh, sir, have pity on me. Don't tell any one that I did it. It would break my mother's heart if anything happened to me. And my father would pay you well; he would indeed,' cried Best.

But this was the last straw. The young doctor rose in his wrath, and taking the boy by the collar, put him outside the door, which he shut upon him. Then, to soothe his ruffled temper, he lit a cigarette, and gave no further thought to the unhappy boy, who stood outside the closed door for a moment trying to collect his wits, which had been scattered by the doctor's warning and summary treatment. At last, feeling there was no more to be done, Best turned to go home, alternately vowing futile vengeance upon the doctor, and miserably wondering what he was to do next.

His way took him past the Rectory, and he suddenly resolved to make a last appeal to Mr Karslake, who was known to be kind and charitable to every one.

The Rector had just returned from his drive, and when he heard that young Master Best wished to see him, he at once ordered that the boy should be shown into the study.

'Well, my boy, how are you?' he asked, holding out his hand.

'I'm all right, sir; at least, I'm awfully upset,' replied Best.

'Tell me all about it, and let us see if I can help you,' said the Rector kindly, as he put the boy in the same chair in which Cuthbert had sat the first day he had seen him. The contrast between the two boys, the one so frank and intelligent and refined, and the other so commonplace and ignoble, struck the Rector in spite of himself; but he put this thought from him, and prepared to listen to his visitor, who explained, as he had done before, that he was upset about Cuthbert's illness.

But this time Best made no offer of hush-money, though he again pleaded the sorrow of his mother.

The Rector listened to the whole story, helping now and then by a kind word, till he learned that Best had had no idea he had a stone in his hand, and was horrified when he found that the blow had had such a serious effect upon his schoolfellow.

'You are not altogether to blame for Standish's illness, my boy, for the severity of the blow was unintentional. But do you know what you ought to have done? You should have told the story to the head-master, and you ought to have come at once and inquired after your schoolfellow. That would have been manly and straightforward,' said the Rector; and he gave the boy a very kind lecture, which was taken in very good part by the culprit. Best finished by sending a contrite message to Cuthbert, and by promising to make a clean breast of it to the head-master, and went off much happier in mind.

Dr Benson found that the interruption had broken the thread of his thoughts, and finally put down his pen, and strolled along the road to the Rectory.

'I have been sorely tempted to-day, Rector,' he remarked, as he stood outside the window and looked into the study. He was intimate enough with Mr Karslake—whom he had known before he came to settle in Bowcester—to come round in this unceremonious manner, and was a little taken aback when he saw that the Rector had another visitor.

‘Come in, come in, doctor; it’s only Jessica Standish,’ cried the Rector in tones of welcome.

‘How do you do, Miss Standish? No, I won’t come in, thank you. I’ll stop outside and finish my cigarette. I presume my patient is getting on all right, as his sister is here?’ replied the doctor.

‘Cuthbert is asleep, and I just came down to speak to Mr Karslake,’ explained Jessica.

‘What was the temptation, Benson? Or is it not for publication?’ inquired the Rector, who knew by experience that the doctor was the last man to jest about a real temptation.

‘Well, no, it is not for publication; but it may interest Miss Standish. It was that young Best,’ began the doctor.

‘Did he offer you one hundred pounds?’ inquired Jessica with her shy smile.

The doctor looked up quickly. ‘Oh, he tried to suborn you too?’ he inquired, with a twinkle in his eye.

‘Poor boy, he was frightened at the result of his bad habit of throwing stones,’ put in the Rector.

‘Well, Rector, I’m all for charity when it is possible, but really that seems to me to be stretching a point. I should call that kind of habit a vice,’ protested the doctor.

But when the Rector had told his version of the tale, the doctor apologised for his harshness. ‘I’m afraid I was rather hard on him. In fact, I turned him out neck and crop. He put my back up by trying to buy me off, and I am no saint, worse luck!’ he said.

‘It was very excusable, but the boy lost his head. He is very sorry now, and sent kind messages to Cuthbert.’

Jessica got up to return to her brother. ‘When you see that boy, Mr Karslake, please tell him I am sorry I spoke unkindly, and that I did not know it was an accident,’ she said.

The doctor smiled at the Rector when she had gone. ‘You make us all ashamed of ourselves,’ he observed.

‘I am a great deal more ashamed of myself,’ said Mr Karslake, rising and joining the doctor in the garden.

Jessica went up to Cuthbert, who still slept, and did her lessons by his side, only leaving him when she had to go to bed.

The anxiety and confinement were beginning to tell on her, and on the fifth day, by which time the doctor said he felt quite sure there were no serious results to be feared, she looked quite ill.

If Mrs Manning noticed it, she did not say anything. In fact, when Jessica, thinking it the right thing to do, gave her the daily bulletin of Cuthbert's health, she either gave an impatient 'Pshaw!' or made some sharp remark about the waste of time.

But every one else noticed it; and when they heard that she lived in her brother's sickroom except when obliged to leave to take her meals and go to school, and when they saw her looking paler and thinner, the girls at school were obliged to admit that she was fond of her brother, 'in a way.'

'There are people like that. They just like one person, and spend all their affection on him, and don't care a rap for anybody else. And it's all very fine for the person they care for, but it's very disagreeable for the rest of the world,' remarked one girl noted for her clever judgment.

And this was more or less the opinion of most of her schoolfellows, who never asked after Cuthbert, having been snubbed by Jessica the first day.

Only Ivonne Beddard understood Jessica, and helped her by her cheery, sympathetic manner through the days when she was waiting for the doctor to pronounce Cuthbert quite safe from any complications.

And on the fifth day, when school was over, Jessica could hardly drag herself from school, she felt so tired and languid; she found herself actually not seeming to care about the doctor's decision, which she had been so anxiously awaiting all these days. So the girls to whom all the facts about Cuthbert's illness were now known, and who took a great interest in him, and were inclined to make a hero of him, had some excuse for thinking that Jessica had not much feeling.

CHAPTER XII.

JESSICA HAS A FRIGHT.

JESSICA walked so slowly down the road towards the Rectory that almost all her schoolfellows who went that way passed her, and, as may be imagined, many were the comments made upon her apparent indifference to her brother's illness.

'Do you think I would stroll along like that if I had a brother ill, and wanted to know whether he was going to die or not?' cried one girl hotly.

'It's not so bad as that; the doctor only said that he could not pronounce him out of danger of complications till to-day,' corrected another girl.

'How do you know? I understood that he said the boy might die or be an idiot, and one's as bad as the other,' argued the first speaker.

'I know what he said, because Mrs Karslake told my mother, and she said that at present there was no danger, only the doctor would not let him get up or do anything till to-day, for fear of complications. But if no bad symptoms appeared by this morning, he was to get up this evening; and if he were my brother I'd just fly home to see how he was,' the other girl wound up.

They had reached the bottom of the road, and the girls, out of curiosity, stood still to watch Jessica walk with the same loitering step to the Rectory gate, which she opened in the same quiet, composed manner.

No one, not even Mr Karslake, who did understand the girl, knew that her heart was beating so fast that it seemed as if it would suffocate her, or that she had worked herself up into such a state of fear that she dared not look up at the windows for fear she should see the blinds down. But when she was close to the door and was going to ring the bell, she saw, to her dismay, that the blind of the door was down, and starting back, she looked up, only to find that every blind was down.

Jessica turned and left the garden, and walked blindly across to The Acacias. She did not know that the door was opened by Mrs Manning, or

that the latter was speaking to her, and she was walking past her without a word, when she felt her arm taken and shaken rather roughly as Mrs Manning said, 'Don't you hear what I say? What is the matter with you?'

'I beg your pardon; I did not hear you,' said Jessica, who was always polite, whatever her state of mind.

Mrs Manning looked at her, and said less roughly, 'Are you ill?'

'I—I don't think so; but it doesn't matter, because Cuthbert is dead. But please let me go and be alone,' replied Jessica in a tired kind of voice.

Mrs Manning recoiled. 'Dead!' and she let go Jessica's arm, and watched the girl go slowly up to her room. Then she seemed to be struggling with herself, and finally went up to her own room, put on her bonnet and cloak, and walked across the road to the Rectory.

In the years that Mrs Manning had lived in Bowcester she had never entered the Rectory. She had not even returned the first visit of the Rector and his bride, which had not prevented the Rector from calling from time to time to ask how she was; and as he was never asked in, he made her acquaintance in the street—if, that is to say, it can be called making an acquaintance with a person who barely said 'Good-morning' in response to all greetings.

Great, therefore, was the surprise of the passers-by, not to mention the girls who had been watching Jessica, to see Mrs Manning enter the Rectory gates.

They were still there discussing Jessica's extraordinary conduct in coming out of the gate again so quickly.

'She can't have stopped long with her brother,' one cried.

'She didn't go in. We should have heard the door shut. Besides, she had not time. She just went to the door and asked, and came away. That's a nice sort of sister to have!' said her companion, quite oblivious of the fact that the door would have had to be opened and shut in this case just as much as in the other.

But no one saw the injustice of this accusation, and the girls all agreed that Jessica was a very heartless girl, who probably disliked sickrooms, and on hearing that there was no danger (for surely, if there had been danger, even she would have gone in to see Cuthbert) had just gone home to tea.

Then they exclaimed at her thinking of tea at such a time; and then Mrs Manning appeared.

‘Well, of all the wonderful things I ever heard of, that is the most wonderful!’ cried one girl.

‘I say, what do you suppose it means? Do you think he really is worse? And fancy her not going in!’ they protested one after the other and all together.

At this moment another person joined them, a girl of about nineteen, who had left the High School a couple of years ago, but who still knew most of the girls. ‘What are all you young people doing here blocking up the pavement?’ she demanded in a slightly superior manner.

‘We are wondering how Cuthbert Standish is,’ replied one girl.

‘You won’t find out standing there. To judge by his sister’s face, he is worse,’ said the elder girl, who had passed Jessica as she crossed the road.

‘Worse! Why? How did she look?’ cried the girls, crowding round the new-comer in their eagerness for news.

‘She looked very grave. Not that she ever looks very cheerful, to be sure,’ reflected the elder girl.

‘That’s past everything,’ said one girl, breaking the silence that followed the last piece of information.

‘What passes everything?’ demanded the elder girl, in surprise.

‘Why, Jessica Standish does. Fancy not going to see her brother when she hears he is worse! I hope he is not going to die,’ they cried.

‘You don’t know for certain that he is worse. I am sorry I said anything about it. You girls are so silly, jumping to conclusions like that; and if the youth interests you so much, why don’t you go and ask how he is?’ she demanded.

‘Mrs Manning is there,’ replied one of the girls doubtfully.

‘That doesn’t make any difference. You need not go in, of course; you can just ask at the door,’ urged another, catching at the idea that the previous speaker would go and inquire after the invalid.

‘I’m not going alone, so you needn’t imagine it; but if anybody will come with me, I’ll go,’ said she.

‘All right; we two will go. After all, it’s a matter of public interest. He is a new-comer, and he has been injured by one of the town boys; and we all want him to get well, for everybody’s sake,’ they declared; and the two went

off, while the others waited at the street corner to hear the news. Even the elder girl, though she pretended not to be interested, waited too.

The two messengers had just got to the Rectory garden gate, when they met Mrs Manning coming out with quick step, and an angry look on her face.

'Oh, please, I beg your pardon, but is he worse?' cried one of the girls, in confusion, as she knocked against Mrs Manning in her haste.

'No; he's quite well,' Mrs Manning said with a snap; and the girls, in fright at her tone, recoiled, and, after a moment's hesitation, returned slowly to their friends, arguing upon the subject as they went.

'He's quite well,' they announced as they neared the expectant group.

'What!' they cried in concert; and one exclaimed, 'What do you mean? Besides, you never went in. I believe you were afraid.'

'We asked Mrs Manning, and that's what she said,' they persisted.

'Mrs Manning! But that's nonsense. He is not quite well, whatever else he is. I—I suppose she does not mean that he is dead. People talk like that sometimes of people when they die,' suggested one girl.

The elder girl looked grave. 'That would account for Jessica's face. I think I had better go myself and ask,' she said.

'He's not dead, or Mrs Manning wouldn't have said it like that. She seemed annoyed, as if we were making a fuss about nothing,' persisted the girl who had spoken to Mrs Manning.

'I'll go and ask,' said the elder girl; and she did so, followed to the gate by all the other girls, to whom she came out with a beaming countenance after a few minutes.

'Mr Cuthbert Standish is much better, and sends you his compliments and best thanks for kind inquiries, and hopes to come and umpire your next match,' she announced to the excited group.

'Did you send up to ask him?' demanded one girl.

'No; I saw him,' the other announced, enjoying the sensation she was causing, and laughing at the expressions of their faces.

'You went up to his room? Well, I call that rather forward of you. You don't know him at all, or even his sister,' they objected, being rather envious of her, if the truth be known.

‘I did *not* go up to his room,’ she retorted, teasing them.

‘Then how could you possibly see him? His room is on the first floor. I believe she’s only stuffing us,’ one of them declared.

‘I beg your pardon, I actually shook hands with the hero, who gave me that message for you. He seemed very much flattered at your interest in him,’ said the elder girl, mocking them.

‘I suppose he was downstairs. Then he really is all right. Well, that’s a good job,’ said one of the girls; and they finally dispersed, to retail the good news to any one they met, for every one was disturbed about the accident, which *some* said was an accident; while others declared, with significant shakes of the head, that it was a very awkward sort of accident, and one that might be difficult to explain if anything should happen to Cuthbert.

The Rector, who had been sitting with Cuthbert in the lounge when Mrs Manning was announced, was as surprised as every one else to see her, and also very pleased.

He rose to greet her with his usual friendliness; but when Mrs Manning saw Cuthbert sitting there looking beaming (the truth being that he had asked to be allowed to be there to greet Jessica), she said not a word, but cast an indignant look at him, went out of the garden as fast as she could, and, as has been related, met the girls with a scowl upon her never very pleasant face.

The Rector turned and looked at Cuthbert, whose face was flushed as he bit his lip to avoid showing how he felt this treatment. ‘Poor thing, she must have had some great trouble, which she has taken amiss,’ Mr Karslake said by way of apology to Cuthbert.

‘I can’t understand where Jessica is,’ was all Cuthbert said. He was too hurt to be sorry for Mrs Manning’s private troubles.

He had not long to wait. Mrs Manning went home, and up to Jessica’s room. ‘What do you mean by telling such a story about your brother?’ she demanded angrily.

Jessica was lying on her bed, not crying, but feeling sick and ill, and looked at Mrs Manning with dull eyes. ‘What story?’ she asked.

‘The story of his being dead, when he is quite well, and sitting in the hall,’ said Mrs Manning.

‘Cuthbert well? He can’t be,’ cried Jessica, getting up, however; and with a hasty smooth to her hair, she ran downstairs and across to the

Rectory, opening the door without ringing, in her agitation.

'Cheer-oh!' cried Cuthbert as she ran to him. Then, as he saw her shaking all over, he said, 'What's up, sis? Has she been saying anything to you? Anyway, never mind her. I'm all right now, the doctor says; only I've got to go slow, because I'm not too steady in the upper stories,' he said, laughing.

Jessica smiled too; but she looked so white that the Rector made her sit in a chair and drink a cup of tea. 'Cuthbert and I are starving, but we were waiting for you to come and assist at the feast and cut the cake cook has made in honour of the occasion,' he said, smiling kindly at her.

Jessica's hand trembled when she took the cup that the maid gave her, and the Rector and Cuthbert, seeing that she was too agitated to speak, let her alone.

Mrs Karslake came hurrying in from a visit she had been paying. 'Well, there you are, Jessica; and Cuthbert down again, thank Heaven! And I hear great news in the town,' she said, beaming upon them all.

'Indeed! Let us hear it. It ought to be a visit from royalty at least,' observed her husband, helping her to tea.

'It is a visit to *us*. Haven't you had one?' she inquired.

'Oh yes, a deputation from the High School girls, who were most kind, and wanted to know how Cuthbert was,' said the Rector.

'I don't mean that. They told me that Mrs Manning had called here,' said Mrs Karslake, and looked inquiringly at her husband.

Mr Karslake frowned. 'I do wish people would not gossip,' he said with a sigh.

Mrs Karslake gave a quick glance at Cuthbert, whose face had clouded over, and at Jessica, who looked as quiet and reserved as ever; and gathering that there was something wrong, she changed the conversation, and said to Jessica, 'The whole town is pleased to hear of Cuthbert's recovery. I have had to stop at every few steps, I can assure you, to give news of the illustrious invalid.'

'People are very kind,' murmured Jessica; while Cuthbert said heartily, 'I should think they are! Fancy the High School girls being so jolly! I feel rather a fraud, for really I've not been so bad.'

‘No; but you might have been; and I think the town is relieved that there is not going to be a trial for murder,’ cried Mrs Karslake, speaking, as usual, upon impulse.

Mr Karslake made a movement as if to stop his wife, but seeing that it was useless, sat back in his chair and frowned.

Cuthbert opened his eyes. ‘A trial for murder! But what has my illness to do with that?’ he asked, not understanding what she meant.

‘Mrs Karslake is joking,’ said the Rector; ‘and as you are so much better, there is no occasion to talk of what might have been;’ and he gave his wife a mild look of reproach.

But unfortunately Cuthbert caught the look, and said, ‘I don’t understand. Surely nobody thinks my illness was anybody’s fault?’ and he began to look worried and anxious.

‘It was an accident, Cuthbert. Don’t think about it,’ said Jessica, going over to her brother and putting her cool hand gently on his forehead.

‘But I want to know, how does anybody know anything about it? Did I say anything when I was ill?’ he asked, beginning to look worried.

‘No, no, Cuthbert. It’s all right. Best’s conscience pricked him, and he thought he had killed you; hence all this excitement about your illness, and talk about trials,’ explained Mr Karslake, using, as usual, his tact to put right the trouble his wife’s want of judgment had caused.

She looked at her husband with a sigh. ‘Ah, Jessica, I wish I were self-contained like you; it would save me such a lot of trouble,’ she said.

‘Oh, but it wouldn’t really. If you only knew how I wished I could say things sometimes, but simply can’t,’ cried Jessica, to the surprise of them all.

‘By the way, Jessica, what did you do after school?’ broke in Cuthbert, dropping the other subject when he saw that the Rector’s wife had said more than she meant, and deciding to talk it over with Jessica later on.

Jessica had recovered herself now, and the reaction after her recent fright made her more talkative than usual. ‘I went to The Acacias, because—the blinds were down here,’ she said, and gave a laugh, in which, however, there was a catch.

There was silence for a moment. At first they did not understand her, and then Cuthbert gave a hearty laugh. ‘You all seem determined to kill me off,

but you need not be alarmed. I feel as fit as anything; only my head's a bit funny,' he cried.

'And didn't you come to ask?' cried Mrs Karslake. 'I should have. I don't wonder you get the name of being cold-hearted.'

Mr Karslake looked at his wife in despair; she seemed to be unusually tactless this evening; but he only said, 'Christine, you don't mean that, I am sure.—Now, Cuthbert, you have been downstairs quite long enough for the first time. I am going to take you up to bed.'

When they were gone Jessica said to Mrs Karslake, 'I know they think me cold-hearted, but I can't help it.'

'Oh, I am so ashamed of myself! I can't think how it is I say such things. I give Edward no end of worry trying to unsay them,' she cried; and Jessica saw, to her distress, that there were tears in Mrs Karslake's pretty eyes.

'Oh, but, please, I did not mind what you said. I knew that people—at least the High School girls—said that kind of thing about me, and I am sorry; but I don't see how I am going to change myself. I wish you could tell me how,' Jessica replied, with an appealing look at Mrs Karslake.

The latter put out her hand impulsively and took Jessica's, and the girl, being shaken out of her usual reserve by the events of the day, did not repel the advances of Mrs Karslake, who said, 'My dear, I can't teach you. I'm full of faults.'

'Oh, but everybody likes *you*,' said Jessica.

Whereupon Mrs Karslake laughed, and said quite humbly, as she kissed Jessica, 'We should make quite a good mixture if we were shaken up together, so perhaps we can teach one another.'

Then Jessica went up to her brother's room to do her lessons beside him, leaving Mrs Karslake with a better understanding of her, and feeling warmer than she had expected to feel after a talk with Jessica Standish.

CHAPTER XIII.

A BOWCESTER TEA-PARTY.

'Now look here, Jess, I'm not going to have people worrying that young Best because he happened to hit me too hard; so, when you go to school to-morrow, just you tell all the girls that it was a mistake, will you?' exclaimed Cuthbert when Jessica arrived in his room.

'I don't see that it is necessary, Cuthbert. Why should we take any notice of what people say?' protested Jessica, unconscious of the air of disdain with which she said this.

'It's no use your talking like that. We must take notice of this, because it's hard lines on Best to be treated like a murderer when he didn't do anything, really,' argued Cuthbert.

'But he did do something, and he's a very horrid boy,' remarked Jessica with feeling.

'You don't know anything about boys,' retorted Cuthbert.

'I know that one, and I don't like him,' said Jessica.

Whereupon Cuthbert wanted to know how she knew him, and she related the story of her encounter with Best, and his offer of money.

Cuthbert listened till she had finished, and then gave a hearty laugh, and continued to laugh immoderately.

Jessica looked at him severely. 'I don't see anything to laugh at—offering me money, and for such a thing! It's dreadful,' she said indignantly.

But the more she protested, the more Cuthbert laughed. 'I'd have given a good deal to see your face when Best offered you that hundred pounds. You know, Jess, a hundred pounds would not be a bad beginning for our fortune. If you had been business-like you would have closed with it at once, and said, "All right; give me the money down, and, come what may, I'll be mum." It's too late now,' he wound up with pretended regret.

‘It would have been a very bad beginning for any one’s fortune to take a bribe—horrid boy!’ repeated Jessica, laughing, all the same, at Cuthbert’s suggestion; for her brother always did her good, and she was a different person with him.

‘But, joking apart, Jessica, can’t you say something to the girls?’ urged Cuthbert.

‘I’ll try; but I don’t talk much to them,’ admitted Jessica.

‘Then it’s time you did! Why don’t you? They’ll think we are proud, or something rotten like that,’ objected Cuthbert.

‘They won’t think that, because they don’t know anything about us, or that we have anything to be proud of. Besides, you are nice and friendly with them; it is only I they don’t like. And it isn’t pride really, Cuthbert; it is merely that I don’t feel as if I could bother to speak to them, or to anybody that doesn’t understand,’ replied Jessica.

Cuthbert seemed to understand this vague speech, for he replied, ‘There’s nothing to understand; at least, only what every one can see for himself or herself—that we haven’t any parents, and that we have come to live with a woman who is no relative, and who doesn’t want us; in fact, that we are not particularly wanted by any one.’ Cuthbert gave a little laugh, in which, however, there was not much merriment.

‘We want each other, anyhow; and perhaps by-and-by Mrs Manning will want us. You know, Cuthbert, she does take some notice of us,’ declared Jessica.

‘I’m bothered if I’ve seen any signs of it!’ growled Cuthbert.

‘Yes, you have. You saw her looking out of the window at our gardening; and I am sure it was she who put those chairs out for us. Kezia says she did not; so it must have been Mrs Manning,’ replied Jessica.

‘There was a young lady of Moscow
Who was horribly scared by a cow;
But she sat on a stile,
And continued to smile,
Which softened the heart of that cow,’

misquoted Cuthbert, and added, ‘and if any one could perform that miracle here, you could; so perhaps you are doing it.’

Jessica laughed. ‘Anyway, I’m going to try; though I don’t think you ought to liken grown-up people to cows.’

‘Bulls might be better,’ observed the incorrigible Cuthbert, and continued: ‘Don’t keep on being shocked like that. One wouldn’t believe you were the same girl that used to be so jolly at home. I don’t say you were rowdy; but you used to laugh at things that you make no end of a shine over now. I wish you’d buck up.’

Jessica tried to look cheerful, but the effort was not very successful; and Cuthbert burst out again: ‘Now I am not going to have you make yourself ill trying to please or convert anybody; so there, Jess!’

Whereupon Jessica made an effort to brighten up, and by talking of Cuthbert’s work at the Rectory did get herself into a more cheerful mood; but the grief and troubles she was passing through were a great strain upon her, and very soon became too much for her, as will be seen.

In the meantime Bowcester interested itself very much in these two orphans, who seemed to have fallen from nowhere, and especially discussed the reserved girl with the ‘aristocratic features.’

Mrs Gould, the mother of Charlie and of one of the girls in Jessica’s class, was very anxious to make friends with her, and stopped her one day when she was walking down the street with Cuthbert. ‘Good-morning,’ she said. ‘Will you come to tea with me and Edith to-day?’

Jessica, who did not know Mrs Gould at all, or who Edith was, was taken aback by this abrupt invitation. ‘Oh, thank you; I am afraid I cannot,’ she said, and was going to pass on, when Cuthbert caught her skirt, and taking off his hat, turned to Mrs Gould.

‘You are very kind, and we should like to come to tea with you; but we are staying with our guardian, and must ask her leave first;’ and he gave his frank smile.

Mrs Gould, who had been going to pass on, affronted, smiled instead, and replied, ‘To be sure, I ought to have asked her first. I’ll drop her a note; and I hope you will both be allowed to come. I’d like you to be chummy with my Edith;’ and she turned to Jessica.

‘I am afraid I am not a chummy person,’ said Jessica gravely, but added, as Cuthbert looked vexed, ‘but I will try to be more friendly;’ and she held out her hand and smiled in what she meant to be a friendly manner.

But Mrs Gould did not consider it so. 'My word, Edith, she's a haughty young lady! She's civil enough, but she somehow looks over one's head. Do you know whom she reminds me of?' Mrs Gould asked her daughter.

'No one that I ever met,' replied Edith.

'No; it's a person in a book, a princess, you know, who masquerades as an ordinary young woman for a fortnight, and makes every one feel small.'

'You mean the princess in *Priscilla's Fortnight*. That's just what we feel at school, and it's horridly uncomfortable. The boy isn't the same, so it can't be that they are really anybody; it's just that she's stuck-up,' declared Edith.

This was rather what Cuthbert seemed to feel. At any rate, when they had left Mrs Gould and were out of earshot he took Jessica to task for her manner.

'Why did you sit upon that woman, Jess?' he protested.

'Did I? I'm sorry if I hurt her feelings; but she is such a vulgar, overdressed person, I really could not be friends with her, though I will try to be friendly to Edith,' replied Jessica.

'I suppose it's rough luck on you. Women seem to mind mixing with all sorts of people much more than men do. Now I rather enjoy the boys at the Grammar School, and I can't see much difference between them and our cousins except in their way of speaking, perhaps, and one or two little ways.'

'Then the boys at the Grammar School must be very different from the girls at the High School, for they are quite unlike our cousins. They haven't the same sense of honour, to begin with,' Jessica was saying.

But Cuthbert broke in hotly, 'Honour! That depends on what you call honour. I wonder whether the relatives of the fellows at the Grammar School would leave them alone if they got poor! I don't know that I'm much struck by the sense of honour of our cousins.'

'I wasn't talking of that. I meant about cheating at lessons and little mean things like that. Fancy Aubrey giving up wrong marks or keeping her history book open during the lesson!' said Jessica.

'I'd swallow a few little things like that if people were kind-hearted in big matters, and not mean about losing large sums of money,' declared Cuthbert stoutly.

'You are not turning Socialist, Cuthbert, are you?' cried Jessica.

‘Socialist? I don’t know what that is; but if a Socialist is a man who thinks we’re all much of a muchness inside, and that there are good folk in all classes, why, I’m *it*,’ said Cuthbert, laughing, his short fit of resentment against his relatives being past.

‘Cuthbert, I wish you didn’t feel so bitter against them all. Father said he quite understood their behaviour; and we could not have gone to them even if they had wished it, because father arranged for us to come here and help Mrs Manning,’ urged Jessica.

Cuthbert was working in the garden when the end of this conversation took place, and he dug his spade vigorously into the ground and flung the earth on the bed. ‘And so I am helping, am I not? This garden is going to be a paradise. Hallo!’ wound up Cuthbert so abruptly as to make Jessica start.

‘What is the matter? You made me jump,’ she cried.

‘You are the matter. What do you mean by gardening in this silly way?’ he demanded.

‘I don’t know what you are talking about. I have only dug up what I knew were weeds, and tied up the roses, and cut the grass,’ she replied.

‘Then who planted these carnations here, fancy varieties?’ he inquired, laying down his spade to examine a clump of carnations which had been planted, or, rather, earthed up, in a very amateurish way in a shady place.

Jessica came over to look at them. ‘It must have been Mrs Manning. I don’t suppose she knows much about gardening,’ she observed.

‘I shouldn’t think she did. They’ll never grow there. I wonder if she’d mind my moving them. But I’m not going to ask her mind,’ he added hastily.

Jessica scraped the earth off. ‘Why, they are not planted in the ground at all! They are in pots; so I am sure Mrs Manning meant us to put them where we liked. I will do it if you tell me where. You had better go on with your digging,’ said Jessica, taking up two pots in her hand.

‘No fear! You just want to take all the blame if there’s a row; but I’m going to have my share. We’ll just plant these pots in the earth as they are, or they’ll stop flowering. What beautiful flowers they are! Fancy her spending money on that kind of thing!’ cried Cuthbert.

While they were planting the carnations Jessica happened to glance up at the house, and there saw Mrs Manning at her window; but she dropped the curtain when she caught Jessica’s eye, and disappeared. ‘It’s all right, Cuthbert,’ said Jessica to her brother; ‘Mrs Manning has been watching us.’

‘I hope it is, but I’m not so sure. Anyway, if she makes a row I’ll send her in a bill for gardening in return.’

Jessica had no need to force herself to be cheerful that day, she was so pleased at Mrs Manning’s little act of kindness.

Kezia came out to watch them at work. ‘Did you find *they* blooms?’ she inquired.

‘Yes. You mean the carnations? Did you put them there?’ asked Jessica, fearing for the moment that they were not Mrs Manning’s gift, after all.

‘No, not I. I don’t know extra special plants like that. It was the mistress; but you hadn’t better let her know I told you. La! I was took aback when she came stalking in by the side-door with a great armful of *they* blooms, and to see her bending down and scraping up the earth over them. Well, there, it’s no good talking; some folk are past understanding; but it shows as she’s got a heart, which, to tell you the truth, I’ve misdoubted.’

It was of no use trying to curb Kezia’s tongue, and Jessica did not attempt it. The girl criticised her mistress and every one freely, and Jessica consoled herself by the thought that she was not malicious in her comments.

Cuthbert only laughed. Kezia’s quaint dialect was new to him, and he enjoyed her shrewd remarks.

They were all in the garden when the door-bell rang, and Kezia disappeared to answer the door.

‘It’s a note for the mistress and an invitation for you, if I’m not mistaken,’ she announced when she came back.

‘Oh dear!’ exclaimed Jessica impulsively. ‘Well, we sha’n’t be allowed to go, that’s one consolation.’

‘Don’t you like going into company, miss?’ cried Kezia.

‘Oh yes; only I’m busy just now with this garden,’ hastily replied Jessica, regretting her slip.

However, that afternoon Mrs Manning came into the schoolroom with a note in her hand. ‘Mrs Gould, the mother of one of your schoolfellows, wishes you to go to tea with her to-day. You had better get ready and go at once,’ she said, and left the room.

Jessica and Cuthbert looked at each other, Jessica in dismay, but Cuthbert gave a hearty laugh.

‘You’re in for it now, Jess. Put on your best smile and tucker. Mrs Gould means it kindly, so for goodness’ sake do thaw a bit, and try to be nice.’

‘I can’t think what you interfered for, Cuthbert. She did not ask you really; you invited yourself, and have let me in for this,’ cried Jessica.

‘It’s jolly nice. They’ll have rich plum-cake, and French pastries with cream inside; you see if they don’t. I’m glad I did invite myself,’ said Cuthbert.

‘You horrid boy! One would think you were really greedy, if one did not know better!’ cried Jessica, half-laughing and half-vexed.

‘If liking plum-cake and meringues is being greedy, then I am, and take no shame in it,’ cried Cuthbert as he went off to wash his hands, followed reluctantly by Jessica.

Cuthbert was a true prophet. The table groaned with dainties, to which Cuthbert and Charlie did full justice; while Jessica sat quiet and reserved, and took very little of anything.

Mrs Gould, strange to say, was a little nervous, and spoke louder and laughed more noisily in consequence, which at first made Jessica shrink more into herself, till it suddenly dawned upon her that Mrs Gould was making efforts to be kind to her, and that she was not showing much gratitude; whereupon she tried to be nice, and succeeded so well that Mrs Gould became natural, and therefore nicer.

‘There, Edith; you said I ought not to have asked them, and that it was no use trying to make friends with Miss Standish, as she didn’t want to know us. Now who was right?’

‘I was—about her not wanting to know us; but I must say she can be nice when she likes,’ replied Edith.

Meanwhile Cuthbert was teasing Jessica as they went home. ‘Now wasn’t that tea worth going for?’ he demanded on purpose to shock her.

‘Certainly not. I would rather have had plain bread and butter at The Acacias,’ retorted Jessica.

‘Well, I wouldn’t! Those chocolate éclairs were prime. Besides, I’ve done you a good turn; I’ve made a friend for you, where you nearly made an enemy,’ he added.

‘I’m not a bit grateful. I don’t want Mrs Gould for a friend, and I shall never be able to be friends with Edith,’ declared Jessica.

‘You never know what you can do till you try,’ said Cuthbert.

‘Oh yes, I do. I know I can’t be friends with a girl I have nothing in common with.’

‘You’ll have plenty in common with these girls when we have lived here some years. Now you’ll see this will be the first of a series of invitations, and we shall become quite dissipated,’ Cuthbert assured her.

But Jessica was not at all pleased at the prospect of a series of such tea-parties. ‘Cuthbert, I won’t go; so I warn you not to go accepting invitations and encouraging people to ask you,’ she cried.

But Cuthbert only laughed heartily at her vehemence, and began enumerating acquaintances who might possibly invite them, all of which conjectures Jessica treated with lofty disdain.

CHAPTER XIV.

JESSICA'S TROUBLES AT SCHOOL.

BOWCESTER was a small town, and, as has already been said, there was not much for its inhabitants to do, unless they were engaged in business. Consequently, like all places where there are many unoccupied people, it was very busy with its neighbours' affairs.

How the rumour got about is not certain, but one morning, when Jessica had a headache and looked ill, one of the High School girls said to another, 'I say, just look at Jessica Standish when she comes out of the cloakroom. They say she has nothing but a slice of bread a day.'

Her companion gave a shocked exclamation. 'Nothing but bread! But she would be dead if she had nothing else. You can't live on white bread. Who told you so, Edith?' she demanded.

'Our baker's boy. He serves The Acacias, and Mrs Manning only gets half a loaf a day,' replied the first speaker.

'I don't believe it. She may have only half a loaf of bread, but he can't know what the butcher sells them.'

'Well, you just look at her; there she is, Bessie,' said Edith.

Bessie Knight gave a quick glance at Jessica, who, as usual, replied with a polite 'Good-morning,' and passed on.

'There, now, doesn't she look bad?' asked Edith Gould.

'She looks pretty bad. But what does that old woman mean by it? Hasn't she got any money?' asked Bessie, looking sympathetically after the retreating figure of Jessica.

'I don't know, I'm sure; but if she hadn't any money, she had no right to take boarders and starve them,' cried Edith.

'Perhaps they haven't any money either, and she just took them out of charity,' suggested Bessie, who had a kind heart herself, and could not understand unkindness in other people.

‘If you call that kindness, I don’t! Starving people like that! If they had not any money, why didn’t she send them to an orphan asylum? They would have had enough to eat there, at least,’ cried Edith.

‘It’s very difficult to get into one, I know, because my father subscribes to one, and he is always being asked for votes; and he said only the other day how hard it was to have to refuse so many people who wanted to get some poor boy or girl in,’ said Bessie.

‘Jessica Standish doesn’t look that sort exactly. She couldn’t go to a poor orphanage, but there is a school for indigent ladies’ children somewhere. Has your father got anything to do with that?’ inquired Edith.

‘I don’t know. You require to have a lot of votes for these things; and we don’t know that Jessica wants to go to an orphan school. Perhaps she’s ill,’ said Bessie.

‘Of course she is. So would you be if you had to live on a slice of bread a day! They say Mrs Manning is so mean that she grudges her that. I’m sorry for Jessica; but she’s so stuck-up, you can’t be friendly with her,’ observed Edith.

‘She’s not stuck-up. She walked home with Lizzie Self yesterday, and her mother keeps a little general dealer’s shop; and Fanny and I saw her shake hands with Mrs Self. I expect it’s humility that makes her keep to herself as she does,’ said Bessie.

‘Humility! What do you mean? It’s not my idea of humility, after you’ve been to tea with them, to say “Good-morning” to people and pass on with a stiff bow. Besides, what has she to be humble about?’ cried Edith.

‘Well, I should feel rather humble if I had to live on the charity of other people, and only had a slice of bread a day,’ said Bessie, who was a good-natured but rather stupid girl.

‘You mean hungry, not humble. It’s not her fault that she is half-starved; and Jessica Standish isn’t humble, whatever else she is,’ declared Edith.

‘Poor thing, it’s dreadful to think of her being hungry! I’ve got some chocolate in my pocket. I’ll give her some,’ said Bessie with a sudden inspiration.

‘Yes, do,’ agreed Edith; and the two went to Jessica where she stood leaning against the wall with her ‘apart’ air, watching the girls talking and laughing together. She said ‘Good-morning’ to any one who came near her, and answered very civilly if spoken to; but she never spoke to any one first.

Bessie went up to her with a paper packet in her hand. ‘Will you have some chocolate, Jessica?’ she asked.

Jessica looked down at the white paper packet and said, ‘Thank you,’ and was going to take a chocolate-drop, as she thought, out of civility, but found that the bag contained large slabs of chocolate, so she broke off a tiny piece and put it in her mouth with a smile.

‘Oh, but do take more; it is awfully good, really,’ said Bessie; and as Jessica shook her head, she said, ‘It’s very nourishing; it will do you good. You want something to fatten you.’

Jessica grew, if possible, paler than before, and drew herself up as she replied, ‘Thank you, I do not want any more.’

Edith drew Bessie away, saying to her when they were out of Jessica’s hearing, ‘What on earth did you say that for? Didn’t you see how she turned white with rage?’

‘I don’t see why she should get into a rage because I asked her to have some chocolate! Well, you won’t catch me offering Jessica Standish my chocolate again; and if she’s starving she had better go to an orphanage, but I sha’n’t bother about helping her. O-oh! don’t pinch, Edith. You hurt,’ Bessie wound up; for Edith had taken her companion’s arm and squeezed it as tight as she could in the vain attempt to stop her.

Bessie was one of those slow-witted people who are not easily turned from their purpose, and once having begun a speech, she went on with it until it came to an end. This time, however, the last words froze on her lips as she stood open-mouthed and gazed at Jessica, who had come near her, and who stopped and said quite quietly, though two red spots on her cheeks showed that she was inwardly excited, ‘I am sorry I annoyed you just now. I am not angry at all, but I have only just had breakfast, so I could not eat your chocolate,’ and then passed on, a little more erect and stiffer than before.

The two girls looked at each other in consternation, and at that moment Ivonne Beddard came up to them. ‘Now what have you two brilliant specimens been doing? You look as if you wished you hadn’t, whatever it is,’ she cried in her brisk and lively way.

Edith laughed, for this exactly described her feelings; while Bessie replied in an injured tone, ‘I haven’t done anything except offer Jessica chocolate, and she wouldn’t take it. I don’t know what all the fuss is about.’

‘Nor I, if that is all; but you must have done something to her, for Jessica Standish doesn’t look like that for nothing,’ persisted Ivonne, looking from one to the other.

‘I did nothing,’ repeated Bessie sulkily, for her feelings were hurt. ‘They said she was hungry, and I gave her some chocolate.’

Ivonne flashed a look of anger at her. ‘You stupid girl!’ she said, and turning on her heel, went after Jessica, whom she found looking over a lesson on her favourite seat under the tree.

Ivonne put her arm round Jessica and said cheerily, ‘What news of the brother? He is getting on all right, I hope?’

‘Oh yes, thank you,’ said Jessica with a smile of welcome.

‘And you? How are you getting on? I think his accident hurt you as much as it did him. You are looking quite ill.’

‘No, thank you—I mean, I am not ill; and, please, I wish people would not keep saying that. I have just lost my colour since I came to Bowcester, that is all. I dare say the air in the north was more bracing,’ replied Jessica.

‘If that is all, it’s all right; but you must not get any paler, or you will be mistaken for a ghost,’ replied Ivonne.

Jessica smiled, but she did not laugh as she usually did at Ivonne’s sallies; and the latter continued: ‘You are sure there is nothing the matter, Jessica? You would tell me if there was, wouldn’t you?’ asked Ivonne, looking at her.

‘There is nothing that you can help, Ivonne. I would tell you if there was. But you can’t do anything, and I think it will be all right soon,’ replied Jessica.

Ivonne did not see how Mrs Manning’s meanness was going to be ‘all right’ soon, and as she knew Jessica would stand from her what she would not endure from any one else, she said, ‘Are you quite sure I can’t do anything? It is not very kind to your friends to shut them out when you are in any trouble, Jessica—that is to say, if you will let me be your friend?’

‘You are as bad as the rest, Ivonne. You talk as if you thought I was very difficult to be friends with,’ cried Jessica.

‘Help!’ exclaimed Ivonne so dramatically that Jessica was taken in for the moment.

‘What is the matter?’ she inquired.

‘I am in a terrible hole,’ cried Ivonne in a strangled tone.

Jessica looked down at the ground involuntarily, but seeing that her friend’s two feet were swinging to and fro, and were most certainly not in any hole, she remarked, ‘I can’t see any signs of it.’

‘It’s like the troubles you are to sit on—in the mind,’ explained Ivonne.

‘I don’t see how I am to help your mind,’ said Jessica.

‘Nor do I. Let us return to our muttons. Am I your friend or am I not?’ said the other.

‘Yes, with pleasure,’ replied Jessica.

Ivonne took a diminutive handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped her brow. ‘That is accomplished,’ she observed, heaving a sigh of relief.

Jessica laughed. ‘You are very absurd,’ she protested; ‘and if it has been all that trouble, it certainly was not worth it.’

‘Jessica Standish, I’d rather be friends with you than with—whom shall I say?’ declared Ivonne.

‘A burglar,’ suggested Jessica, with a shy look.

‘That’s a most offensive remark, and not what I should have expected from you,’ began Ivonne lightly; then she finished up seriously: ‘Anyway, I do want to be friends with you more than a little, and—and, Jessica, couldn’t you leave off being proud and several miles higher up than I am just for five minutes?’

‘What do you want me to do—in plain English?’ asked Jessica.

‘I want you to tell me if you are happy in Bowcester,’ demanded Ivonne, half-afraid of the result of her plain speaking.

‘No, not very; but I am not unhappy,’ said Jessica.

‘The Oracle of Delphi isn’t in it with you. Would you mind telling me why you are not happy and not unhappy? Though how you can manage to be neither I don’t pretend to understand.’

‘I can easily tell you why I am not very happy—because I have lost my father, and my home, and a good many things I was fond of, and I have some bothers here. And I will tell you why I am not unhappy if you particularly wish it,’ said Jessica rather reluctantly.

‘I do particularly wish it, though I am not curious as a rule,’ persisted Ivonne.

‘Well, then,’ began Jessica with evident effort, ‘I am not unhappy, because I know things will be all right by-and-by, and I am trying to do something my father wanted me to do, and I am so glad to be able to do it for him.’ Jessica said the last words very softly.

Ivonne gave her friend’s arm a squeeze. ‘You are a dear to tell me that; but, Jess, for goodness’ sake don’t grow wings. I don’t want you to fly away,’ she said.

Jessica laughed. ‘I don’t think there’s any fear of that. I don’t feel in the least good, if that’s any consolation to you; and I don’t think any other girl in the school expects to see my wings.’

‘Oh, the other girls! They are a set of geese. You don’t take any notice of what they say or think, I should hope?’ cried Ivonne, with a lofty contempt for her schoolfellows which would have made them very angry if they had heard her.

‘I am afraid I did take notice of something they said to-day, which was stupid of me. Not that I mean that I think them geese. I suppose they are no more silly than I am; in fact, I am sure they know a good deal more than I do except just languages and music, and, of course, I had special masters from town for those things,’ began Jessica, and stopped.

‘You must miss all that; and you are very angelic about it, whether you have wings or not, and, if you ask me, that is rather a mistake. Now don’t look at me with those big eyes of yours, which are getting too large for your face. I am not inciting you to murder. I only mean that it is much easier to bear things if you give way to your feelings and make a moan. That’s why the Irish are such a cheerful nation. If any one dies, they sit and grieve round the corpse, and get other people to help them, and make a terrific to-do; and that exhausts their grief, and they cheer up after it is over; whereas people who keep on smiling from the first don’t get over it, and often break down in the end; and that’s what I am afraid you will do,’ said Ivonne, taking Jessica’s arm.

Jessica smiled. ‘If that is what you are afraid of, you need not be, for I did break down when—my father died, and when we had to leave our home; so perhaps that is why I seem to be more cheerful than you expect me to be.’

‘Cheerful’—— began Ivonne, and broke off. ‘You are very exasperating, and I can’t help you.’

As they were due at a lesson the conversation ended; and that afternoon Ivonne went home early, so that Jessica did not see her again that day. She

was walking down the road, when she noticed that a girl was walking beside her, and, looking to see who it was, recognised Lizzie Self, to whom she had been kind when the other girls had snubbed her.

'Well, Lizzie, how are you getting on?' she asked kindly.

'Not very well, miss,' replied Lizzie; and on looking at her, Jessica noticed that she had been crying.

'What is the matter, Lizzie? And don't call me "miss." My name is Jessica.'

'Oh miss, I couldn't!' exclaimed Lizzie.

'Couldn't what? You mean you couldn't call me Jessica. But why not? We schoolgirls all call each other by our names,' said Jessica.

'Yes, miss; but not you. Ma says it would be a great liberty to call Miss Bent'——

Jessica turned on Lizzie quickly. 'I am Jessica Standish here, please; and please don't call me anything else. Tell me what is the matter with you. That is far more interesting than my name;' and Jessica smiled to reassure Lizzie, who looked rather frightened.

'It's my French, miss. The lady that teaches us says if I can't pronounce the words better than I do, it's no use my coming to her class; and ma'll be so mad with me. She says she's pinching to send me to school, and I've got to make the best of my opportunities,' said Lizzie, beginning to sniffle.

Jessica was silent for a minute, and then said, 'If your mother liked, I would help you with your French. I think I should like to come home with you now, if you think your mother would have time to talk to me.'

'Yes, miss—Jessica—I'm sure she would; and she'd like to see you, I know,' said Lizzie eagerly.

So she and Jessica turned down the little back-street in which Mrs Self's shop stood.

'Come in, miss; I'm pleased to see you; and it's very kind of you to take notice of my little girl here,' said Mrs Self, leading the way into the little parlour behind the shop.

'Mrs Self,' said Jessica, 'Lizzie told me to-day that you know my other name, so I want to explain to you that we wish to be known only by the name of Standish here. Will you please not talk of me by any other name? I suppose you know some one from our old home?'

‘Yes, miss. Your chauffeur’s brother married my sister’s husband’s cousin, and she wrote and told me; and I can tell you it gave me a turn to think of my Liz being at the same school as you, though you may be come-down in the world. But I’ve told her to be most respectful and take no liberties,’ replied Mrs Self.

Jessica laughed. ‘And I have told her she is to call me Jessica; so please don’t forbid her, as I don’t want the girls to talk. Besides, we are schoolfellows, and schoolfellows always call each other by their Christian name. You should not have sent her to the High School if you did not want Lizzie to be friends with her schoolfellows,’ she said.

‘Well, miss, if you put it like that, I’d be proud to have you call Lizzie a friend; and we shall never forget the difference between us, for if there’s one thing I can’t abear, it is folk that try to be bigger than they are,’ replied Mrs Self.

‘I came partly to ask you if you would like me to help Lizzie with her French. I can speak French rather well, because I was taught as a little girl, and I would help her to pronounce it properly if she liked,’ said Jessica, turning the conversation.

Mrs Self brightened up. ‘I’d be more than grateful, miss; for, though I’ve had a Board school education, and, though I say it as shouldn’t, I can do sums with any young lady at your school, but I can’t get my tongue round French, which not a word is pronounced as it’s spelt. And yet it would be a great thing for Lizzie to know it; she’d get a good place as teacher if she had French to her name.’

‘Very well, then, Mrs Self, that is settled; and as I am here, I’ll go over to-morrow’s lesson with Lizzie,’ said Jessica, and sat down to do so.

Mrs Self stood and listened in admiring silence for a time; and then the shop-bell rang, and she went back to her duties.

CHAPTER XV.

KEZIA GOSSIPS, AND REPENTS.

WHEN JESSICA had been helping Lizzie for nearly an hour, she got up to go. 'I think you will be able to pronounce all the French words in that exercise quite as well as the other girls to-morrow, Lizzie; and I will come and help you again before the next French lesson,' she said.

'Oh, thank you so much, miss—Jessica, I mean. I understand now how to pronounce French, and it's not so bad, after all,' said Lizzie, looking relieved.

'It's more than kind of you, miss; and I don't know how to repay you. If you'd honour us by taking a cup of tea'—— began Mrs Self, coming in from the shop.

Probably but for the fact that she was really hungry (for Mrs Manning, without meaning to starve her wards, did not give them enough nourishing food), and that this fact seemed to be a matter of gossip, Jessica would have accepted the invitation for fear of hurting the Selfs' feelings; but the chocolate which had been offered her stuck in her memory, and she hastily refused, adding, 'But you must not talk of repaying me, Mrs Self; for if you are related to Collins' (their former chauffeur), 'I am only too glad to do anything I can to help Lizzie; he was so kind to us.'

When Jessica had gone Mrs Self watched her as she went down the street, and then turned into the shop with a sigh. 'I'd have made her a good cup of tea, and a relish with it, with pleasure; and she'd have been none the worse for it, if what you tell me is true; though it doesn't seem possible that the young lady and gentleman from that big place should be begrudged their food by their guardian, and not have money to get what they want,' she said as she laid the table for their own tea.

'Mind you don't say anything to her, ma, or she'll never speak to us again. She's dreadful proud. And perhaps it isn't true,' cried Lizzie.

'If it is, I'll make her have tea here next time she comes, whether or no,' declared Mrs Self.

Lizzie, who was eating a 'relish' in the shape of tinned herrings, laid down her knife and fork with an air of alarm. 'You'll never do any such thing, ma. She'd never forgive you. She's one of those folk that never complain and don't want pity. Besides, she's religious,' she wound up.

Mrs Self looked in surprise at her daughter. 'Whatever's that got to do with it, Lizzie? If she's religious, it's the more reason why she shouldn't be proud,' she protested.

'I didn't mean that. I meant that it didn't matter so much to her—not having all she wants or much food,' explained Lizzie.

'Well,' observed Mrs Self with her mouth full, 'I know there's John the Baptist, that lived on locusts and wild honey, a thing that turns my stomach to think of. But he was one of the saints, and they could do things; and, for my part, I hold that a growing girl and boy want good nourishing food, and plenty of it, religion or no religion.'

'Miss—Jessica doesn't think so, for she said so to me,' maintained Lizzie.

'Do you mean that she belongs to one of those religions where they don't eat anything and aren't ever ill, or say they aren't?' asked Mrs Self, evidently with some hazy idea of Christian Science.

'No, of course not. She's a Christian like us; only she's better,' announced Lizzie.

'You can speak for yourself. I don't hold with children judging their parents, specially when it's a mother that's brought you up alone, and toiled and moiled for you as I have, and then gets that for gratitude,' cried Mrs Self, much annoyed.

'I am grateful, ma. I know what you've done for me, and I'm going to work hard and get a good situation, and keep you in comfort by-and-by,' cried Lizzie.

Meanwhile Jessica was hurrying home to be in time for tea, which, however, she had alone, as Cuthbert went straight to the Rectory after school, and had dinner there every evening. It took less time to have his tea brought into the workshop while he was starting the machinery, and it was more convenient for him to leave the workshop with Mr Karslake when he went to dinner, Mrs Karslake elaborately explained to Jessica; and Jessica gladly believed this, and was thankful that Cuthbert should have good food, though she refused all offers of hospitality for herself.

Kezia was watching for her at the side gate, and looked relieved when she appeared. ‘You are late, miss. I thought you was lost,’ she cried.

‘I went home with a schoolfellow to help her with her lessons,’ explained Jessica.

‘You haven’t had tea; have you, miss?’ asked Kezia anxiously.

‘No,’ replied Jessica, colouring; for she thought Kezia hoped that she had.

But Kezia cried, ‘I am glad of that. I made you a tea-cake, and I’ve had a job to keep it warm. If you’ll go up to the schoolroom, I’ll bring your tea at once.’

Jessica looked at Kezia and smiled. ‘You spoil me, Kezia,’ she said, and ran on humming gaily. Not that she cared so much for cake, but Kezia’s kindness warmed her heart.

She was eating the cake, when the schoolroom door behind her opened. ‘This tea-cake is delicious, Kezia,’ she said.

‘And what business have you to be wasting my money on cakes?’ asked a harsh voice.

Jessica started and dropped her cake. ‘I am sorry, Mrs Manning. Please don’t scold Kezia,’ she said.

But Mrs Manning had gone, and Jessica heard her talking angrily to Kezia. But Kezia evidently was not afraid of Mrs Manning, for Jessica heard her speaking in far from apologetic tones; and finally Mrs Manning said, ‘I beg your pardon; I did not know,’ and came upstairs.

Jessica hesitated for a moment, and then, taking up the tea-cake, of which she had only eaten a quarter, she stopped her guardian and said, ‘Here is the tea-cake. Would you rather I did not eat it?’

Mrs Manning seemed taken aback, and mumbling, ‘No, no; eat it up. It was not your fault,’ passed on.

Jessica was glad for even this little sign of kindness, and finished her tea quite happily.

‘I don’t think you had better make me any more cakes, Kezia. You see, Mrs Manning can’t afford it,’ she said when the maid came to clear away the tea.

Kezia gave a sniff and screwed up her nose. ‘What she can afford and what she can’t is best known to herself; but as regards that cake, she can afford it very well, seeing that it didn’t cost her a penny-piece.’

‘Oh Kezia, where did you get it?’ cried Jessica, half afraid Kezia had been begging for her, a thought that was intolerable to her proud spirit.

‘I made it, miss, out of some flour I—had, so to speak,’ replied Kezia.

‘You must not use your own money to buy us food, Kezia; though it is very, very good of you to want to. If Mrs Manning does not mind your making cakes for us, I will give you money for it.’

‘Don’t you worry, miss; it didn’t cost me anything to speak of; and as for Mrs Manning minding, I don’t take no notice of that, seeing that she ought to be ashamed of her mean ways, and all the town crying shame on her,’ said Kezia.

‘What business is it of anybody in the town what is done in this house?’ said Jessica, looking vexed.

‘Nobody’s business is everybody’s business, especially in a small town, miss,’ said Kezia.

‘I hope you haven’t been gossiping about our private affairs, Kezia?’ said Jessica.

Kezia looked uncomfortable. ‘I’ve never said anything against you, miss, so don’t you fret,’ she replied. ‘And as for what I’ve said of Mrs Manning, I’ve said no worse behind her back than I’ve said to her face, and no longer ago than this very afternoon; and if you wasn’t an angel born you’d never put up with it, and so I told her just now; and why you don’t up and tell her you won’t be put upon passes me, for ’tisn’t as if you hadn’t money of your own, for you have.’

‘You seem to know a great deal about our affairs,’ said Jessica, looking surprised.

‘I know *that*, for the mistress let it out when you were coming. “I shall give you a rise in your wages for the extra work they make, as is only fair,” says she; “and they can afford it, though the money they’ve got should be mine by rights;” and with that she twists her mouth and goes away; but I thought you ought to know it,’ said Kezia.

‘I hope you won’t speak of this. And please, Kezia, don’t talk in the town about what goes on in this house. If you knew how miserable it makes me feel to know people are talking about Mrs Manning and us, you would

not gossip about us,' said Jessica, looking most unhappy. 'Besides, Mrs Manning gives us just the same as she eats herself, and it is really enough.'

'I'm sorry now, miss; and I'll hold my tongue for the future, whatever questions I am asked;' and Kezia looked rather guilty as she cleared the tea-things away.

Jessica wondered why she had laid such emphasis on the words 'whatever questions I am asked,' and supposed some inquisitive people had been pumping her. She was to know soon, unfortunately.

As for Kezia, she went down to the kitchen in a very penitent mood, and had hardly put the tray down when the back-door bell rang. She went to open it, and found, to her amazement, one of the chief citizens, Alderman Roberts by name.

Kezia, it will have been observed, was a young woman who spoke her mind—rather too freely at times—and she was no respecter of persons. 'La, sir, whatever makes you come to the back-door? If you'll step round to the front, I'll tell the mistress you're here,' she cried.

But the alderman put out his hand to stop her as she was going to shut the door in his face. 'Don't trouble Mrs Manning yet, thank you. My visit is to you,' he said.

'Me, sir!' cried Kezia. 'I don't have no visitors except my young man once a week, and my father and mother;' and she made no attempt to ask this visitor in.

Alderman Roberts began to get rather annoyed. 'Considering the statements you made to me last week, I do not understand why you should be so surprised to see me,' he exclaimed.

'Statements!' said Kezia, screwing up her nose. 'What statements? I gossiped a bit maybe, but I didn't make no statements; and I hope you aren't going to twist what I said into statements,' she protested.

'You told me certain facts which, as president of the local branch of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, I was bound to take notice of,' began Mr Roberts.

'Oh—ah—that's it? Well, you needn't be bound any longer, for the young lady don't wish it,' declared Kezia.

Alderman Roberts looked hard at Kezia. 'I don't know what you mean; but unless you are going back on your statements—tut, tut!' (as Kezia

protested)—'I mean, the facts—things you said were facts—I am bound to stop the cruelty which is going on in this house.'

'Cruelty! What cruelty, pray?' demanded Kezia.

Alderman Roberts looked indignantly at Kezia. 'I have your own evidence'—— he began.

'I don't know nothing about it,' she announced stubbornly.

For a moment Mr Roberts was speechless at this attitude; then he continued in a determined tone of voice, 'Whether you know to-day what you said a few days ago, or whether you don't, I should advise you to know if you are asked in court.'

This was the last straw. At the mention of the court Kezia's composure broke down. 'I'm not going to be dragged into no courts, not if the King himself came to fetch me; and I'm well punished for letting drop a few words of gossip,' she vowed.

'It won't be the King but a couple of policemen that'll do that if it's necessary. But if you take my advice, you'll tell the truth now, or else explain why you said the young lady and gentleman here weren't properly fed, to begin with.'

'Oh, well, as to that, opinions differ as to what's proper food for children. Now the young lady has had a couple of slices of bread and butter and a tea-cake for her tea, and she hasn't quite finished it, as you may see if you will step inside,' said Kezia glibly.

Alderman Roberts eyed her severely. 'Are you aware that you are laying yourself open to a charge of false witness and slander if you can't prove what you said to me the other day?' he demanded.

'Who's going to charge me?' said Kezia, cowed at last.

'Your own words. Some one has evidently been tampering with you, and you now want to unsay what you have said; but that is not so easy, as you will find,' said Alderman Roberts, turning on his heel and going off without saying, 'Good-evening.'

Kezia looked after him in much dejection. 'I wish I'd bitten my tongue out before I chattered to him the other day. I didn't know he was one of them interfering Cruelty to Children people, or I'd have seen him further before I breathed a word about Mrs Manning. Now what had I better do next? I have half a mind to tell Miss Jessica all about it. She'll be rare and annoyed; but she's got a head on her shoulders, and she's a right to know if they are going

to court us all,' muttered Kezia; and then, little though she liked it, she went up to tell Jessica.

The latter listened, but said nothing, though her colour rose while Kezia told at great length and with many excuses of how she had met Alderman Roberts, 'which used to keep the big drapery-shop when 'twas only a one-window concern; and he knew me as a little girl, and stopped to pass the time of day, and got talking on whether I was comfortable where I was, and I says, as it might be to a friend, that things might be better and food more plentiful, which no one can deny that the mistress is terrible mean and not too pleasant to live with, and don't treat you as she ought;' and here Kezia stopped to take breath.

'But what has that to do with putting you in court, as you call it, Kezia?' asked Jessica.

'Well, miss, he's the head of people to prevent cruelty to children, and he thinks you are starved,' Kezia said, hanging her head.

'Oh Kezia, what have you done with your chattering? Poor Mrs Manning!' cried Jessica.

'She didn't ought to treat you so callous-like,' said Kezia.

'But, Kezia, even if Mrs Manning is cold in her manner, that is no reason for your saying that she starves us. It is not true. I have enough to eat,' declared Jessica decidedly.

'Well, miss, you look downright poorly of late, and I'm sure you could do with more than you get here sometimes,' persisted Kezia.

'I worry, and—and you know we have lost our father, and I miss him, and that makes me look pale. Besides, we were rather spoilt, I think, before we came here, and had all sorts of unnecessary things, and I dare say we feel the change; but I will not have you say Mrs Manning is cruel to us; and if you have said so, you must contradict it, and say I am very fond of her, and that she has never been unkind to me.'

Kezia stared at Jessica for a minute, and began, 'Well, miss'—— and then continued, 'Still, I'll say this. I've noticed since you've been here that the mistress has once or twice spoken a bit softly to you, so maybe you'll bring her to her senses. I've a notion she likes you against her will, so to speak.'

Jessica's eyes shone. 'Oh Kezia, I am so glad you think that! I do so want Mrs Manning to like me. So now go and tell that man not to interfere

with us or to believe that we are unhappy or starved,' she cried.

'Cruelty! What cruelty, pray?' PAGE 221.

'I'll do my best, miss; but Alderman Roberts is a terrible obstinate man, and when he's got an idea in his head it generally sticks there, try as you may to get it out. But I'll tell him that she'd have to be made of stone if she

didn’t like you,’ replied Kezia; and she went and put on her bonnet preparatory to going to interview Mr Roberts.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MAN FROM TOWN.

JESSICA was very young, and had led a sheltered life, so that she was rather more ignorant of the ways of the world than most girls of her age. She did not understand Kezia's talk about the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and was only annoyed at being gossiped about, and at people saying unkind things of Mrs Manning. That any one would dare to take any steps to interfere with her guardian or with them never entered her head, and after Kezia had gone Jessica went on with her lessons. She was getting on very well at school, and had come out head of her form in the monthly report, and Mrs Trotter had told her she would be moved up after the midsummer holidays if her final exams. were as satisfactory.

Kezia was not by any means so comfortable in her mind, and waited in Mr Roberts's kitchen until the great man should condescend to see her, getting more and more uneasy every minute that she was kept waiting.

After some time she was told to step into the dining-room, where she heard men's voices and some laughter, which cheered her up, as she concluded that it meant that Mr Roberts was in a good humour.

'Come in, Kezia; come in,' he said cheerfully. 'This is my friend Mr Smithson come down to Bowcester to have some fishing—eh, Mr Smithson?' said Mr Roberts, turning to the man who was sitting in an arm-chair smoking.

'That's what I hope to do to-morrow, sir, weather and the trout permitting,' he replied.

'And what can we do for you, Kezia?' inquired Mr Roberts.

'It's rather private what I wish to say, sir,' replied Kezia.

'Don't mind me; I sha'n't hurt you,' replied the other man.

'Mr Smithson is my friend. You can speak before him quite freely,' Mr Roberts assured her.

So, as Kezia saw there was no chance of getting rid of Mr Roberts's companion, she began: 'It's about what I said about Mrs Manning, sir. Miss Standish is fearfully put about, and says it's not true that she's unkindly treated; and she's that proud, it would break her heart if it was to come out in public court that she was starved.'

Poor Kezia was so flustered by having to speak of such matters before a stranger that she did not know what she was saying, and said just the opposite to what she intended.

Mr Smithson came to the rescue. 'I can believe that poor young lady. If she's proud she'd never complain, would she?' he suggested.

'No, sir, that she would not,' cried Kezia, turning to this kindly, good-humoured man with relief, and telling so much in praise of Jessica and her brother that she unconsciously painted Mrs Manning in dark colours and made her out to be really cruel.

Mr Smithson was scribbling hieroglyphics on a piece of paper, and when Kezia left he was smiling very contentedly.

'Well, sir, I think I've got a good case for headquarters, and need not fear that they will say I've wasted my time down here; and I think I shall have deserved a day's fishing after I've called at a place or two,' said Mr Smithson.

Mr Roberts showed him out, and Mr Smithson strolled down to the Rectory, meaning to ask the cook a few questions; but as he was going along the path leading to the kitchen he met Mrs Karslake, who, seeing a stranger, supposed it was some one wishing to see her husband, and stopped him with a kindly greeting and inquiry as to what he wanted.

Mr Smithson, who was a private detective from London, was not easily disconcerted, and said, 'I want your aid in a case of distress. Not for myself,' he added, smiling, as he saw Mrs Karslake's expression. 'It is for two orphans in whom I think you take an interest.'

'You had better come again and see Mr Karslake,' said Mrs Karslake, looking suspiciously at the man.

But Mr Smithson had no time to waste; nor did he want to interview the Rector, whose reserve and dislike of gossip had been described to him.

'I should be obliged if you would give me a little information, madam; it would save me time and expense, as I am down here on this case of the Standishes.'

Mrs Karslake drew herself up. ‘What case of Miss and Master Standish?’ she inquired stiffly.

‘A case of cruelty and starvation,’ replied the man shortly, thinking that a strong statement might alarm Mrs Karslake and enlist her on his side.

But he was mistaken. Mrs Karslake had become convinced that the children after the first few days had enough to eat, and also that Jessica was having a very good influence on Mrs Manning, who was changing very much for the better, to the Rector’s, and indeed her own, great joy; so she answered, ‘I do not know what authority you have for making that statement, but I can assure you that you are quite misinformed, and will only meddle in what does not concern you at all, if you take up as a “case” what is not a case of cruelty at all.’

‘Very good, madam. I am obliged for your kindness,’ said the man, taking off his hat and going away.

Mrs Karslake looked after him doubtfully. She did not quite like his manner, and she would have been more uncomfortable if she could have read the bulky letter in his pocket which gave an account of the case of Mrs Manning and the brother and sister Standish, and related Mrs Manning’s doings, notably her ‘meanness’ in the providing of food, with a minute and incorrect account of the diet, as provided for the boy and girl at The Acacias, and the neglect of them by their guardian.

When the letter was posted detective Smithson felt that he had done his duty and earned his salary, and could afford to take a holiday and go fishing, which he accordingly did.

The next day Mrs Karslake (as usual) heard from her cook that the man from London had been over the way asking questions. Cook, as a matter of fact, wished to justify herself for having entertained him by showing that other people had to answer his questions too.

The Rector’s wife began to feel more uncomfortable, and to think that perhaps she had better tell her husband, and she forthwith went to him with the story.

‘I wish I had known of this. I am afraid this is Roberts’s work. He has probably been reporting to headquarters. He is a great stickler for rules and regulations, and I believe he thinks it right to inform the London office of every case, real or pretended, which comes under his notice,’ said Mr Karslake.

‘Tiresome old man! I was sure that Londoner was up to mischief,’ cried his wife.

‘I think I had better go and see him. He is staying at the “Crown,” you say?’ said her husband, taking up his hat.

But when he arrived at the ‘Crown’ he found that Mr Smithson had gone out fishing for the day.

‘Fishing? Are you sure, Gates, or is that only a blind to cover some other sort of fishing?’ inquired the Rector of the host of the ‘Crown,’ who was well known to him.

‘Well, sir, I can’t say what he did when he got outside the door; but if it was a blind, it was very well acted, for he hired a rod and fishing-boots, and went off with sandwiches and a bottle of beer, and said he would not be home till this afternoon,’ said the host.

‘Whereabouts has he gone? Did he tell you?’ asked the Rector.

‘I told *him* where was the best spot, and he said he’d go there,’ replied the man, mentioning a favourite pool in the river about a mile upstream from the town.

The Rector thanked him, and followed the direction which the London detective was supposed to have taken, without, however, much hope of finding him. He was the more surprised and pleased to find Mr Smithson at the point indicated, apparently engrossed in fishing.

There was evidently no blind about his occupation, and the Rector, much relieved, drew near. ‘Good-morning. Any luck?’ he inquired, touching his hat.

‘No; the fish won’t bite to-day,’ replied the angler.

‘Have a cigar to console you?’ continued the Rector.

‘Thank you, sir; I don’t mind if I do,’ said Smithson, looking pleased as he took the cigar and lit it.

‘You are Mr Smithson, I believe?’ said Mr Karslake, who believed in being straightforward.

The man’s face changed so completely at this remark that the Rector half repented of his candour. ‘That is my name, sir,’ replied the detective, busying himself with his rod and line, which he threw out again in another direction, while his mouth was set in a stubborn expression.

‘Then you are the man I want to see,’ observed the Rector pleasantly, ignoring the other’s stiffness.

‘Indeed, sir!’ replied Mr Smithson, without relaxing his stiffness.

‘Yes. I believe you are engaged upon some business in which I am interested, Mr Smithson,’ said the Rector.

‘If you mean fishing, I shall be glad to hear what you have to say,’ began the detective rather coldly.

But Mr Karslake determined not to be turned aside from his object, and ignored the man’s rudeness. Moreover, he felt that he owed him some apology, first, for the reception he had met with at the Rectory, and, secondly, for interrupting him in his hours of recreation with business matters. Fortunately the Rector was an angler himself, so he replied promptly, ‘Well, if you are not above taking advice from a brother-angler who knows this stream better than you, I should advise your going up a few yards higher and throwing your line just beyond that branch.’

Mr Smithson wound up his line, and, with a curt ‘Thank you,’ tried the new place, where, by good luck, he had no sooner cast his bait than he felt a bite, and, after an exciting tussle, landed a small trout.

It might have been a salmon, to judge by his beaming and heated countenance, which he wiped with a large handkerchief, as he remarked in a friendly tone, ‘Not far off a pound, I should say, sir; and I’m much obliged to you for the information.’

‘Not at all. You got him very cleverly,’ said the Rector. ‘I should try round that branch. And I only hope you will manage your other business down here as successfully.’

‘That’s finished and done with, sir,’ replied Mr Smithson politely.

‘I’m glad to hear it. If you would care for my opinion, or any information that I can give, it is at your disposal,’ remarked Mr Karslake.

‘Thank you, sir; but I have decided that there is no need to go further into the matter,’ said Mr Smithson.

‘That is very satisfactory. Very often there is more harm done by interfering than by letting things settle themselves, as I believe they will do in this case,’ said the Rector, who understood from Mr Smithson’s remark that the case was to be dropped.

Whether the detective guessed that he had misled his questioner or not is doubtful. At any rate, he replied with reserve, 'That is not for me to settle, sir. My duty is to make inquiries—which I try to do civilly, though they are not always answered civilly,' he put in in parenthesis—'and to report to headquarters, and they act as they see fit upon that report.'

'Oh, quite so, quite so; it is sometimes necessary to ask questions which are not agreeable to answer, and we Englishmen pride ourselves upon our liberty and independence. You do yourself, I am sure; so you must not take it amiss if other people don't like their private concerns interfered with,' remarked Mr Karslake in a soothing tone.

'No, sir, to be sure. I believe that's another bite,' the detective continued in a hushed voice; and when it proved to be nothing more, he observed, 'You'll excuse my being more interested in fishing than business, for it's very seldom that I have a chance like this.'

'No, I dare say not; and it's too bad of me to come and interrupt you, so I will leave you in peace and quiet, and wish you good luck. Good-morning, Mr Smithson,' said the Rector.

'Good-morning, sir; and thank you for your kindness. It's a pity every one isn't as affable as you,' replied Smithson.

The Rector only laughed pleasantly and went away.

'It's all right, Christine,' he said to his wife; 'you did not do any harm, after all. The man has apparently advised his employers to give up the case, and I must say I am greatly relieved, for sometimes these good folk blunder sadly in their attempt to do good.'

'Are you sure, Ted? Kezia seems to have talked very freely to Mr Roberts, who has apparently retailed it to this man, and she says he wrote it all down, and called it evidence,' said Mrs Karslake, looking doubtful.

'He probably takes the evidence of domestic servants with a grain of salt. Most people do if they are wise. At any rate, I should not worry about it if I were you; but if by chance there should be further inquiries from town, and you are applied to, let me know at once,' said her husband.

So the Rector, his wife, and Kezia all comforted themselves with the belief that the man from London had thought better of it, and decided that it was not a case for his society to interfere with; and Kezia imparted this cheering information to Jessica, who gave a sigh of relief.

‘I am very glad, Kezia. Not that I was afraid that Mr Roberts or any one else could do us any harm; but they might have annoyed Mrs Manning, and I would not have her worried on any account,’ she replied.

‘Well, miss, I’m beginning to come round to your way of thinking myself. She’s got queer ways, has the mistress; but she’s got a bit of a heart, after all, now you’ve woke it up, so to speak,’ remarked Kezia.

Jessica, knowing the uselessness of such an attempt, did not try to check the maid’s frank utterance of her opinion.

After this Jessica dismissed the subject of Mrs Manning’s supposed cruelty from her mind, and as she did not hear any more gossip on the subject, supposed that that disagreeable episode was ended.

She went on with her lessons in French to Lizzie Self, and always stopped to have a cup of tea and a slice of cake or a bun with Mrs Self and Lizzie in the little parlour behind the shop, where Mrs Self put out her best tablecloth and china, and a ‘relish’ from the shop, which, however, Jessica could not be prevailed upon to partake of.

‘Thank you very much, Mrs Self; but I never have been used to having anything but bread and butter or cake at tea-time, and I shall have supper at eight o’clock; though I should like a cup of tea very much, because school makes one thirsty, I think,’ she said pleasantly.

‘Well, miss, now that I come to think of it, the gentry don’t make much of a tea, which I ought to have remembered; but I take it very kind of you to sit down with us as you do,’ said Mrs Self.

And as it gave such evident pleasure, Jessica always, as has been said, had tea after her lesson.

Mrs Manning never asked her why she was late, but she did sometimes ask her if she had had tea, from which it will be seen that her guardian was slowly waking up to some idea of her duty, though she was very far from realising what the duty of a guardian really was.

Cuthbert was very seldom at home except for breakfast and lunch, his work at the Rector’s workshop absorbing all his spare time; and, much as she missed him, Jessica was only too thankful that it should be so.

‘This house is so small and cramped for Cuthbert, and he does not understand Mrs Manning,’ she said to herself; and she might have added that Mrs Manning did not understand him, but she would not blame her guardian even to herself.

CHAPTER XVII.

RIVERCOURT.

'WELL, JESSICA, why this smirk on your countenance?' demanded Ivonne Beddard when she met Jessica the next morning at school.

'Am I smirking?' inquired Jessica, smiling a little more.

'Yes. Worse and worse, you have an air of self-satisfaction which is positively aggressive and offensive,' declared Ivonne.

Jessica laughed right out (which was what Ivonne wanted her to do), and replied, 'I am not satisfied with myself, but I am with everything else.'

Ivonne was silent for a moment. Like every one in Bowcester, she had heard the exaggerated tales about Mrs Manning and her supposed cruelty to her two wards; even Kezia's little attentions in the way of extra delicacies were described as 'added to keep the brother and sister from actual starvation;' and she could not quite reconcile this statement of Jessica's with the above supposed facts.

'H'm!' she remarked at last. 'I congratulate you on your delightful frame of mind. Personally, I can't remember ever finding everything to my liking in this perverse world, or, rather, this world full of perverse and foolish people.'

'Oh, but they don't matter so much if you don't take any notice of them. I did not know I was smiling even,' began Jessica.

But Ivonne interrupted her. 'I wonder whether it is a good thing to go through the world with your nose in the air, and your eyes fixed on an invisible star! In my opinion, you are apt to stumble over some contemptible obstacle in your path, put there, as likely as not, by the people you have been taking no notice of, in your lordly way.'

Jessica looked at Ivonne, a little startled. 'I dare say you are right. Cuthbert is always telling me to be more amiable—chummy, he calls it—with people; and I do try, but I do not seem to be very successful; and even you misunderstand me when I come to school looking happy.'

‘No, I do not. I am only teasing you. I know if you’re good you’re happy, even if you haven’t much to be happy about. Now don’t jump down my throat. I mean, if one has not everything one wishes for,’ said Ivonne. Not that Jessica’s look of reproach could be called ‘jumping down any one’s throat;’ but, as she had said, Ivonne loved teasing Jessica, and was fond of exaggerated language.

‘If you will be serious a moment, I should like to ask you a serious question,’ observed Jessica.

Ivonne was grave in a minute. ‘Now, at last,’ she thought to herself, ‘Jessica is going to confide her troubles to me, and I shall be able to help her.’

‘I am as grave as a judge,’ she replied, and waited.

‘I want you to help me’—— began Jessica.

‘So I will, my dear. Speak on,’ said Ivonne, taking her friend’s arm affectionately at this confirmation of her guess.

‘I want you to tell me how to make friends with those girls. Is there anything I can do’—— Jessica was saying, and stopped short at sight of Ivonne’s fallen countenance.

‘To be friendly,’ said Ivonne, recovering herself. ‘Why, nothing but be friendly. It is not a thing you can very well pretend to be, or if you do you are only found out.’

‘But the way you are friendly with me is by coming and taking my arm, and I don’t think I could do that. I should be afraid they would not like it,’ protested Jessica.

Ivonne threw back her head and laughed heartily. ‘No, I can’t imagine your doing that. As a matter of fact, and now that I come to think of it, you have never been friendly in that way with me. It is always I who come to you. You might practise on me, to begin with. Suppose you come to find me to-morrow instead of waiting for me to seek you out.’

‘Very well, if it pleases you; but you haven’t helped me, after all,’ observed Jessica.

‘Oh, about the other girls. I shouldn’t bother about them if I were you. In the first place, it might cause ructions,’ replied Ivonne.

‘Ructions! How?’ asked Jessica, looking surprised.

‘Ructions with me. I’m your first friend, and I don’t want any one poaching on my estate,’ explained Ivonne.

‘How absurd! It would be quite different. I only want to be more friendly, and not annoy them as I see I do now. I could not like any of them as I like you,’ said Jessica.

‘Bravo! I’ve got a compliment, or at any rate an expression of friendship, out of you, and that’s something. And now I want to know if you will be nice, and come home to see my people. They’re not half bad, you know. We’ll motor you home any time you like in the evening,’ said Ivonne.

Jessica looked a little uncomfortable. She wanted very much to go, for she was very fond of Ivonne; but she thought Ivonne ought to have asked Mrs Manning, and she did not care to go to any one who did not show respect to her guardian, which was partly loyalty to Mrs Manning as her hostess, and partly pride. ‘Thank you very much. I should like to come if Mrs Manning will allow me; but, of course, she must be asked first,’ she said at last.

‘That’s easily done,’ replied Ivonne, producing a note addressed to Mrs Manning from her pocket, and handing it, with a mischievous look, to Jessica.

‘Oh, thank you! But why didn’t you give it to me before?’ Jessica very naturally inquired.

‘Because I did not; and if you really want the truth, I wasn’t sure if you would come, in the first place; and in the second, I wanted to see what you would do. You see, you have such a high and mighty code of—what do you call it?—behaviour, that I like to learn what is the proper thing to do in certain circumstances, and now I know,’ explained Ivonne.

‘You knew quite well that it was the proper thing to ask my guardian, and you ought to have done it at first,’ said Jessica, rather hotly, her pride taking offence.

‘Jessica Standish, there’s a proverb that makes me shiver for you,’ said Ivonne, whose good humour was not easily disturbed.

‘Is there?’ said Jessica coldly.

‘Yes, there is; and it is the one which says, “Pride goeth before a fall;” and if you are not the very proudest girl I ever met in my life, then I don’t know—anything,’ wound up Ivonne.

‘I am sorry, but I am afraid I can’t help it,’ said Jessica stiffly, though she was saying to herself that she knew it was true.

‘Never mind; it doesn’t hurt me, and—I hope it won’t hurt you. Anyway, take that note home, and if Mrs Manning will let you come, we will go back together this afternoon; and you have only to say when you are tired of us, and the car will be round in a jiffy.’ And then Ivonne went off to Mrs Trotter and asked if she might use the telephone to speak to her mother, as it was rather important.

Ivonne was a great favourite of Mrs Trotter’s, and Mrs Beddard was a personal friend of hers, so she said readily, ‘Certainly. I suppose you do not mind my hearing your important message?’

‘Oh no. It is only to say that I have persuaded Jessica to come home with me after school to-day and stay the evening with us, provided always her guardian—save the mark!—will allow her, which I haven’t much doubt about,’ said Ivonne in her free-and-easy way.

‘Well, really, you are welcome to use my telephone, Ivonne, but I can’t see the importance of the message. You could have told your mother at lunch-time that you were bringing your friend home,’ observed Mrs Trotter.

Ivonne was now engaged at the telephone, so she could not reply for a minute; and Mrs Trotter, though not inquisitive, could not help hearing and wondering at the conversation she held over it. ‘No; I think you are pretty safe to say this afternoon. She’s sure to let her come.—Yes.—Well, I’ll phone at once if there’s any hitch; but I mean to bring her.’ And what made it more puzzling was that this was not said in Ivonne’s usual joking way, but was evidently serious.

When she put down the receiver she said to Mrs Trotter, ‘Mother sends her love, and thanks you for letting me use the phone. You see, we are particularly anxious to get hold of Jessica some day—this evening, if possible. I suppose you have heard something about it—this tiresome fuss Alderman Roberts is making, I mean?’

‘No, I have not heard anything except rumours that Mrs Manning is not treating those children well; but I understand the story of their not having enough to eat is quite untrue. The food may not be plentiful or very luxurious, but they have enough. To tell the truth, I spoke to Kezia about it, as I could not allow a pupil at my school to be starved, and she assured me that it was only the first few days, when Mrs Manning did not understand young people’s appetites, that she did not provide quite enough; but even then, Kezia said in her own words, “they never went hungry to bed, for I

saw to that;" and she added that Mrs Manning was "coming round a bit, and beginning to behave like a Christian, which, of course, you can't call her, seeing she doesn't go to church," ' quoted Mrs Trotter, smiling.

'Yes, that is what she says now, but at first she talked very differently; and it was she who started the tale of their being starved, and set that interfering old Roberts on the track,' said Ivonne.

'What has he to do with Mrs Manning? Oh, I remember; he is president of our local Prevention of Cruelty to Children Society. Well, if he goes to interview Mrs Manning he will be snubbed for his pains, and I don't know what more he can do. But I see that you want to get Jessica out of the way,' observed Mrs Trotter.

'It's gone a good deal further than that, and I believe he is going to summon Mrs Manning. But father wants to have a talk with Jessica himself, and see if he can get anything out of her, and avoid publicity. You know he is a magistrate,' explained Ivonne.

'Well, I hope you will be able to manage it. Poor Jessica, how it would hurt her pride to be dragged into a law-court!' said Mrs Trotter.

'Yes, it would; and it sha'n't happen if I can help it. I'd hide her in our coal-cellar sooner,' cried Ivonne. And great was her relief when Jessica came to school after dinner, and said that Mrs Manning would be very pleased for her to accept Mrs Beddard's kind invitation.

Ivonne decided that that message had been edited, but wisely did not say so, and, in a state of suppressed excitement, tucked Jessica up in a dust-rug, and drove off with her, vetoing her suggestion that they should leave her books at The Acacias on their way.

'It's not the nicest way home. We can avoid the town and skirt the river. It is longer, but it will be a nice drive to-day,' she declared; and Jessica, who enjoyed the prospect of the drive, made no open objection.

The Beddards lived at a very pleasant house about two miles from the town, with pretty grounds going down to the river, in which were trout; but the chauffeur, having his instructions, took them a long way round, before turning into the drive, which crossed the river by a bridge.

Mr Beddard stood on the terrace, and came to help them out. The drive had given Jessica the colour and animation she sometimes lacked, and he was struck by her beauty.

‘Come in, my dear. Ivonne’s friend is welcome to Rivercourt,’ he said, with a warm handshake; and Jessica felt more at home than she had done anywhere else since she came to Bowcester—more even than at the Rectory, where Mrs Karslake’s impulsive speeches sometimes made her a little shy.

‘Now, father, just show Jessica that monster trout of yours, and get it over, while I feed the chickens; and then I shall want her to myself.—Father always has to show every visitor his pet trout, which no one ever catches, and which always comes out to be viewed when visitors call,’ Ivonne said gaily as she ran off.

Mr Beddard looked a little embarrassed for a moment, as if he wanted to call her back; and Jessica herself was rather surprised at Ivonne’s abrupt departure, and wondered why she did not ask her to go and help her to feed the chickens. She was just going to beg Mr Beddard not to bother about entertaining her, as she could very well wander down to the river alone, when she heard a very sweet voice, and presently a lady rather like Ivonne came out, and said, ‘This is Jessica, I know; and I see Ivonne, in her harum-scarum way, has gone off, so that we may have the pleasure of getting to know you. You see, I know her little ways; but you must take it as a compliment, she is so anxious that we should know you. I have heard so much of you that I feel as if we were old friends. You are Ivonne’s first girl friend. She was always her brother’s chum,’ said Mrs Beddard, and a sigh involuntarily escaped her, while Mr Beddard straightened himself abruptly.

‘Come, wifey, don’t make Miss Standish sad with other people’s troubles. Let us go and show her our trout-stream, which that naughty girl of ours has been making fun of,’ he said cheerfully.

The three went down to the river and saw the trout-stream, and Mr Beddard pointed out with pride some two-pounders; though the monster trout did not appear, if it existed.

Ivonne had never mentioned her brother, and Jessica was drawn to the poor parents, who had lost their only boy; and when Mr Beddard questioned her, she told him about her father’s death, and added, ‘I have only Cuthbert, and some cousins, whom we have not seen much of lately; and Mrs Manning was a stranger to us till we came here, so, of course, we do not know her well yet.’

‘But she is kind according to her lights?’ he asked.

‘Oh yes. She is not used to boys and girls, but she tries to be kind, and do her duty,’ said Jessica eagerly.

‘To be sure, to be sure,’ said Mr Beddard.

‘Your father, being a man, did not understand how difficult it would be for a person who had never had any children of her own to know what you would want, and so I dare say it has been a little hard for both sides; but you will soon understand each other better,’ said Mrs Beddard; and both she and her husband looked relieved, which Jessica, who fortunately did not resent their inquiries, thought very sympathetic of them.

Then they heard a ‘Coo-ee!’ and Ivonne appeared, flying over the grass, and joined them. ‘Did he come out? I believe he’s a stuffed fish that father drops into the stream when he expects visitors, so that he may boast of having the biggest trout in the neighbourhood in his stream,’ she cried merrily, and then she carried Jessica off.

‘What a beautiful girl!’ cried Mrs Beddard.

‘Yes. But Ivonne is right; she is very proud. It will never do to have Roberts and that crew interfering, and dragging their private concerns into the publicity of a law-court,’ said her husband.

‘No, indeed. But do you think you will be able to prevent it? He is a very obstinate man; and the girl does look delicate, and as if she wanted feeding up,’ said his wife anxiously.

‘Very likely. I should say the food at Mrs Manning’s was so very different from what they have been accustomed to that it would feel almost like privation at first, especially to a fastidious girl like that; but that is no reason for Roberts or his society to take the steps they propose, and I shall take steps to foil him, now that I have seen the girl.’

‘But Ivonne says that he is going to visit Mrs Manning this evening! That is why she has asked Jessica here,’ cried Mrs Beddard.

Mr Beddard gave an exclamation of vexation. ‘I did not know matters had gone so far. I hope he will not do anything indiscreet. The man has no tact or delicacy of feeling. Well, well! I must do the best I can to save that child from more worry and trouble. She looks as if she had had enough to bear,’ he said.

Jessica meanwhile was enjoying herself immensely as she wandered round the stables, and saw Ivonne’s pony and her dogs and other pets, and had no idea that she was being kept out of the way of unpleasant doings at The Acacias. In fact, the time went so quickly between tea and dinner that she could not believe the afternoon had gone, and went home at half-past

nine feeling better than she had done for some time, her arms full of lovely flowers and fruit for Mrs Manning and Cuthbert.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A SURPRISE FOR ALDERMAN ROBERTS.

WHEN JESSICA drove off from the High School with Ivonne in her comfortable car, a good many of the girls who had been at school with Ivonne for a year or more, and had never been asked to her home, looked enviously after them.

'She's in her element now. Look at her talking as happy as a queen to Ivonne Beddard! Now we know why she's been so civil and pleasant to her. We haven't motors to take her about in, so it wasn't worth her while to be nice to us,' cried Edith Gould.

'Poor thing! I expect Ivonne has only asked her out of pity. She knows those two are half-starved,' said Bessie.

'Yes; and the whole town will know it to-morrow. Alderman Roberts says he's going to put a stop to it, and have the whole thing shown up. He says it's a disgrace to our town to have orphans brought into it to be ill-treated as they are. So I don't fancy Miss Jessica Standish will be quite so proud and haughty to-morrow when she has to appear at the police-court. That will take the stiffness out of her,' said Edith with a laugh.

Bessie and one or two of the nicer girls looked serious at this, and Bessie said, 'Who told you that Jessica was going to be taken up by the police? I should like to know the truth of that story.'

'Nobody said that she was going to be taken up by the police. What I heard was that Mrs Manning was going to be taken up for starving Jessica and her brother, and that they will both have to go to the workhouse, being orphans. Of course, I am awfully sorry for her,' Edith wound up, adding this last remark probably because she felt that her schoolfellows were shocked at this idea.

'Oh dear! They won't do that, will they? I can't imagine Jessica Standish a workhouse girl, or that nice brother of hers a workhouse boy. I thought the Prevention of Cruelty to Children people took care of them,' cried Bessie Knight, looking quite distressed.

‘It will be rather a come-down after spending the evening at Rivercourt,’ said Edith spitefully.

Then the girls separated for the day. But Edith, whose way home took her past The Acacias, happening to look in, saw a policeman there, and stopped out of curiosity to see what he was doing. Apparently he was talking to Kezia, or, rather, listening to a voluble flow of language from that irate and frightened young woman.

But, strain her ears as she might, she could not catch one word of what the maid was saying; and as Kezia looked up suddenly and saw her there, she was obliged to hasten her steps, imagining all sorts of explanations of the policeman’s presence, which she finally decided was for the purpose of taking up Mrs Manning. By the time she reached home her vivid imagination had run away with her, and she had convinced herself that it was so, and told Mrs Gould and the rest of the family at the tea-table.

‘La, my dear, you don’t say so? But if they take up Mrs Manning, what will become of that poor girl?’ cried Mrs Gould, looking distressed.

‘She’ll have to go to the workhouse. It will be rather a come-down after Rivercourt; but pride always goes before a fall,’ sneered Edith.

‘Poor thing, I hope it won’t come to that. I shouldn’t mind having her here. She could look after Billy and Totty. I could trust her better than an under-nurse,’ observed Mrs Gould.

‘I don’t fancy Jessica Standish would care to come and be nursemaid here,’ said Edith.

‘It would be better than the workhouse, at any rate,’ replied her mother.

‘Well, I’ll ask her to-morrow. It will be fun to see her face,’ remarked Edith.

‘You’re very spiteful towards her. Now I can’t help liking the girl, though she is a bit stand-offish,’ said Mrs Gould.

‘Don’t hit a fellow when he’s down, Edith,’ said her brother; and then Mrs Gould thought the conversation had better be changed.

Meanwhile Jessica, in happy ignorance of the turn affairs were taking in Bowcester, having said good-bye to her kind hosts, drove up to The Acacias, and jumped out of the car with a pleasant word of thanks to the chauffeur, who carried her basket of fruit to the door for her, and went off thinking what a nice-spoken young lady she was.

Kezia opened the door a few inches, and then, seeing that it was Jessica, opened it wide enough to let her in, and exclaimed in a hoarse whisper, 'Oh miss, I am glad you've come! Oh, such a set out as there has been! The poor mistress is quite ill.'

All the gladness faded out of Jessica's face as she went into the kitchen with Kezia, whose eyes, she now saw, were swollen and red.

'Put these flowers into water, please, Kezia; and give me some dishes for the fruit,' she said quietly.

After Kezia, whose agitation the sight of the lovely flowers and delicious fruit had calmed a little, had brought vases and dishes, Jessica continued: 'Tell me what has happened, please, Kezia.'

'Well, miss, I was sitting in the kitchen quite peaceable-like, when I heard a knock at the front-door, and who should be there but a policeman! And he wanted to know your full name, and Master Cuthbert's, and your ages, which, of course, I wasn't going to give.'

'Why not, Kezia?' asked Jessica.

'Why not, miss?' cried the maid, looking in astonishment at her. 'You don't suppose I'm going to tell the police anything about you?'

'We have nothing to hide from any one, police or not,' said Jessica, holding her head proudly.

'I didn't suppose you had, miss; but it's best to keep out of the way of those gentry. They never come nigh you but to make trouble, if it's only a window you've left an inch or two open, or a door unlocked. However, I am glad you don't mind their knowing your name, for I had to give it to pacify the man,' replied Kezia.

'And what is my full name, Kezia?' inquired Jessica, looking at the maid rather curiously.

'Why, Miss Jessica Standish, of course. I said you might have another Christian name, but I had not seen any; though I knew Master Cuthbert's second name was Algernon, and so I told the man,' explained Kezia.

'So he put us down as Jessica and Cuthbert Algernon Standish,' remarked Jessica, and added, 'Did he say what he wanted our names for? And what made Mrs Manning ill?'

‘Would you please inform me of your diet here yesterday?’ **PAGE 262.**

‘No, miss, he didn’t say why he asked your names, but he said it would be worse for me if I didn’t give them; and Master Cuthbert was over the way, so I couldn’t ask him, and I did not want to trouble him either. But that was not all. A man came later, and insisted on seeing Mrs Manning and putting a lot of questions to her, and upset her finely, and told her she was

not fit to have the charge of children, and that she'd find herself in court; and she turned the colour of that tablecloth, and when he'd gone she fairly tottered upstairs; and she's had no supper nor nothing, and I heard her groaning or something just now.'

As Jessica listened her face was almost as white as the tablecloth to which Kezia had pointed; but she replied quietly, 'I can't understand why people insist upon meddling with us. I think it is very unkind. Give me that small plate, please.'

Then, having arranged the choicest of the fruit on the plate and made a bouquet of the most beautiful flowers, she put them on a tray.

'Miss, do you think you'd better go to the mistress, if that's what you are thinking of doing? You know she's queer when she is disturbed,' objected Kezia.

'I must go and see her. And, Kezia, when Master Cuthbert comes in, don't tell him what has happened. I will tell him myself,' said Jessica, going off with the tray.

She knocked gently at Mrs Manning's door; but getting no answer, she softly turned the handle of the door, and finding that, contrary to custom, it was not locked, Jessica went in. The moon was shining brightly, and there, sitting in her high-backed arm-chair, was Mrs Manning.

Her hands were grasping the arms of the chair, and she turned her head towards the door and said coldly, 'What do you want? Have you come to reproach me?'

Jessica put down the tray, and going up to Mrs Manning, threw her arms round her neck and said, 'Dear Mrs Manning, please don't worry about stupid meddling people. I am quite happy with you, if you will let me be.'

Jessica thought she felt a tear on Mrs Manning's cheek as she kissed her. She busied herself pulling down the blinds and lighting the gas, and then she drew the little table close to her guardian, saying, 'Please eat this fruit. I brought it home on purpose for you.' And, to her surprise, Mrs Manning did eat the fruit, though the fingers in which she took it trembled.

Jessica sat near her and told her of the pleasant evening she had spent at the Beddards', and added as she laid her hand for a moment on Mrs Manning's, 'I wish you had been there; it was so lovely and peaceful in the country, and the river looked so cool and pretty.'

Mrs Manning moved her hand uneasily, but she did not repulse Jessica. It was so long since she had shown any affection for any one, or received any, that any demonstrations of affection made her feel awkward.

Presently Jessica saw that Mrs Manning was tired and would like to be alone, so she said good-night, kissed her guardian again, and went away.

She was just in time to meet Cuthbert as he came in, very full of his work and a successful experiment he and the Rector had made.

'And I'll tell you what it is, Jess. I don't mean to boast, but I believe I shall do something one day. I wouldn't be anything but an engineer if I were as rich as Crœsus,' he said enthusiastically.

'I am glad, Cuthbert. I have enjoyed my evening too. I went to Rivercourt, you know,' replied Jessica.

'Oh yes, I remember. Jolly selfish of me not to ask how you got on; but the Karslakes said you were sure to have a good time, because the Beddards are awfully decent people. He's got a trout-stream, I hear,' said Cuthbert.

'Yes; and Mr Beddard wants you to go and fish there. They have asked us to spend our next whole holiday with them,' Jessica told him.

'Jolly decent of them. People are very decent to us here, I must say. Look at the Karslakes. What should I have done without them?' he replied.

'Most people are very kind, but some are not at all pleasant,' remarked Jessica, and related to him the occurrences of the evening as told her by Kezia.

'The sweeps! They had better ask me to give evidence. I shall soon shut them up,' cried Cuthbert.

'What would you say?' asked Jessica, who was a little afraid that Cuthbert, who did not like Mrs Manning (for which no one could blame him) might say something detrimental to her.

'Say! I should ask them what they meant by poking their noses into other people's private affairs,' he said.

'They would answer as they have said to Mrs Manning—that we are half-starved and neglected,' observed Jessica, to see what Cuthbert would reply.

'That's fudge. We have enough to eat, though it might be more and nicer; and as for being neglected, we are not babies to be run after every minute. Anyway, I shall say Mrs Manning was a friend of my father's, and

that he wished us to stay with her; and so we will. And I must say she has been a little more decent lately, and I suppose people can't help their character,' Cuthbert wound up.

'I do hope they won't drag us into a court. It will be horrid; and, oh, Cuthbert, how angry the cousins will be!' cried Jessica.

'As to that, if it were not for the unpleasantness of it, I'd just like them to see the result of their callous behaviour. It is not *their* fault that we haven't been half-starved, as that man says. In fact, it's my belief that if Mrs Manning hadn't got to like you, and if you hadn't been such a trump that she couldn't help liking you, we might have had a bad time. It wasn't too cheerful when we first came, now that I come to think of it,' remarked Cuthbert. He had been so happy at the Rectory that he had forgotten how miserable they had been the first days of their stay at Bowcester. On the few occasions that he met Mrs Manning she spoke very little to him, it is true, but she did not interfere with him; and even when he banged the door or whistled about the house, she had never taken any notice since Jessica spoke to her about it, and warned her that Cuthbert would run away and go to sea if she did.

So Jessica went to bed glad at least that Cuthbert was 'on her side'—by which she meant on Mrs Manning's side—and that he would not say anything against her if the thing should become public, which, however, Jessica hoped most fervently would not happen.

Next morning she was out in the garden early. Mrs Manning had not again given orders about the two getting up at what Cuthbert called an unearthly hour, and he used to come down when he liked, and so long as he was in time for breakfast no one said anything; but Jessica, thinking that Mrs Manning liked early rising, used to go down early and work in the garden if it was fine.

She was mending Cuthbert's socks in the little summer-house which he had erected, when a man came in at the side gate.

He looked too well-to-do for a tradesman coming for orders, and Jessica wondered idly what he wanted, and was astonished to see him make his way to her.

'Miss Jessica Standish, I believe?' he said, raising his hat.

'Yes,' she replied quietly, looking at him with her big eyes.

'Would you please inform me of your diet here yesterday, for instance?' he observed, clearing his throat and fixing his eyes upon her in a manner

calculated, as he thought, to intimidate her.

Jessica guessed at once that he was the man who had visited Mrs Manning the night before, and though she resented his question, which she considered impertinent, she thought she had better answer him instead of asking him what right he had to question her.

So, rather to the man's surprise, for he had expected to have some trouble in getting an answer, Jessica replied in her usual quiet way, looking gravely at him, 'You have no business to come here and intrude upon me; but as you have probably heard some unkind gossip about my guardian and my brother and myself, perhaps it will put an end to it if I tell you that I have quite as much to eat as I want, thank you.'

'I should be glad to know what you have for breakfast as a rule, please, or, what you had, say, yesterday,' he persisted.

Jessica gave a slight smile. 'Yesterday I had porridge, and eggs, and tea, and bread and butter,' she replied.

The man's pencil was arrested as he glanced sharply at her. 'Porridge—and eggs—and bread and butter!' he exclaimed.

'Yes,' said Jessica, and looked gravely at him.

'And lunch?' he continued, looking as if he doubted her statement, but dared not say so, somehow.

'For lunch we had cold mutton and rice-pudding with jam,' she replied. 'Oh, and vegetables, of course. And I was out to tea and dinner in the evening; but we have cheese and cocoa for supper.'

'Well, if that's correct'—— began the man, shutting his note-book with a sharp snap.

'Here is my brother. If you like, I shall ask him to tell you what he had for breakfast,' said Jessica, her colour rising at the man's words.

'Good-morning,' said Cuthbert, eyeing the man with disfavour, as the latter raised his hat to him.

'Cuthbert, do you mind, please, just telling this man what you had for breakfast yesterday?' said Jessica.

But Cuthbert turned upon the intruder in a fury. 'Excuse me, sis, but I think I had better deal with this—person.—What do you mean, sir, by coming and making impertinent inquiries of ladies?' he demanded.

‘I do what I think it my duty to do, sir’ — — began the man.

‘Then you think it your duty to do very dirty work. If you had any inquiries to make about this house, you should have come to me, not intruded upon unprotected ladies. As for my breakfast yesterday, I had a very good one—eggs and porridge, wasn’t it, sis?’

‘I’m sorry I’ve offended you, sir. I’ve done harm in this case, I see; but if you had had the experience that I have had of ill-treatment of orphans whom I have had the privilege of saving from starvation, you wouldn’t think my work so dirty,’ said the man.

‘I’m sorry I said that,’ said Cuthbert; ‘but you know how you would feel yourself if people talked a lot of rot about your private affairs. It’s kind of you to want to save us from starvation; but there is no starvation going on here. You’d better come and have breakfast with my sister and me, and then you’ll feel satisfied, having tasted the prisoners’ fare. I’ll go and tell Kezia to lay another place;’ and he went off before the man had time to protest.

‘Put your best foot forward, Kezia, and do an extra egg. The Cruelty man is coming to breakfast,’ he said to the flustered maid, who was laying the table.

Ten minutes later, to his surprise, Alderman Roberts found himself sitting at a very cosy breakfast with the two Standishes; while Cuthbert, having heard who he was, and having decided that he had better be conciliated, talked to him on all sorts of subjects, for Cuthbert had plenty of small-talk; and Jessica poured out tea for him and pressed upon him eggs, which had been bought with Cuthbert’s money, if the truth be told.

‘And I never wish for a better breakfast. There was fruit, and honey, and eggs, and porridge, and dairy butter,’ he told his wife and any one who would listen to him afterwards.

But on his way out he revenged himself upon Kezia. ‘Good-day, Kezia,’ he observed. ‘And as you are fond of Biblical names, you might tack Sapphira on to yours. It would be appropriate, and might be a warning to you and save you from her fate.’ And when he heard the door shut violently behind him, Alderman Roberts’s face relaxed into a broad grin.

CHAPTER XIX.

JESSICA IS MISUNDERSTOOD AT SCHOOL.

CUTHBERT, who had accompanied his visitor to the door, kept a grave face until he joined Jessica in the schoolroom, where they had had breakfast, and then he threw himself into an arm-chair and laughed till the tears ran down his face, and until his laughter proved so infectious that Jessica joined in.

'All the same, Cuthbert, I can't imagine what there is to laugh at,' she said after a time.

'No, miss; no more can I,' put in Kezia, who had come in to clear the breakfast-table, and looked anything but amused.

'I'm sorry, Kezia; but if you had seen your face just now when that old buffer went out, you'd have laughed too,' said Cuthbert.

'Begging your pardon, sir, I should *not*. I may be a poor servant-girl, and Tom Roberts a big man now, but time was when he was glad enough to take a penny for pins from me across the counter of his little general shop; and it's not for him to be likening me to Sapphira, which was a woman that died of her lies,' said Kezia, screwing up her nose in disgust.

'Did he really, Kezia? That was very rude of him; and, indeed, I do not much care for the man, and I certainly should not have asked him to breakfast if I had been you, Cuthbert,' observed Jessica.

'I dare say you would not, so it was lucky I came down when I did. Don't you see we have got the ear of the town, so to speak; and that Mr Roberts will make a point of contradicting this stupid gossip, "speaking from experience"?' declared Cuthbert.

'I hope Mrs Manning will not mind. It was rather a liberty to take, asking a stranger in to breakfast,' said Jessica doubtfully.

'It was for her sake I did it; and you can tell her so, if she says anything. In fact, I would not mind telling her myself. I may not approve of her ways, but I'm going to stick up for her, all the same,' said Cuthbert.

Jessica looked round the room and smiled. ‘Mr Roberts seemed to admire the room. It looked extra nice with all these beautiful flowers; but I felt a little uncomfortable at letting him think that we always had honey and fresh eggs as well as porridge,’ observed Jessica.

‘I am glad you did not undeceive him,’ cried Cuthbert.

Jessica did not argue with him. It was nice to hear Cuthbert laughing so heartily and declaring he would ‘stick up’ for Mrs Manning, and things seemed brighter altogether; so, after leaving a kind message for Mrs Manning, who was asleep, Kezia said, Jessica went off to school happier in mind than she had been for a long time.

Cuthbert was getting on at his engineering; and, according to the monthly report, she too was ‘getting on’ with her lessons; and, best of all, she had been able to show Mrs Manning that she was really grateful to her for taking them in, and had been able to stand up for her guardian and save her from a very unpleasant result of her peculiar ways, which had brought this gossip about.

So Jessica went to school with a bright light in her eyes, and smiled at those of her companions who greeted her, and had no idea that they discussed her the moment her back was turned.

‘Just look at her, the hypocrite! She’s acting all the time,’ cried Edith indignantly.

‘Perhaps she doesn’t care,’ said her companion, watching Jessica smiling at some one with a happy look on her face as she leant against the schoolhouse wall.

The girls stood in a group watching Jessica, and they became convinced, strange as it appeared, that she could not be feeling unhappy with that contented expression on her face.

‘She doesn’t care,’ decided one of the girls, looking with contempt at Jessica.

‘She’ll care when she sees the papers to-morrow, and finds that they are full of her and her guardian’s doings. She won’t like being in all the newspapers as a pauper whose guardian starves her, so that she has to be taken by the police and put in the workhouse,’ said one of the girls, with a laugh.

‘But why? She doesn’t look starved, though she is rather thin. Who is doing all this?’ asked Bessie Knight, looking rather flushed and

uncomfortable.

'A policeman from London who came down in disguise and found out a lot of things,' said Edith; 'and he called at Mrs Manning's to see how Jessica was treated, and what they had for dinner; and now he's going to put Mrs Manning in prison, and serve her'——

'Sh!—hush!' cried a number of girls to the speaker, for Jessica was passing them on her way to the school; but it was too late, for Jessica, her face white and set, stood before them.

Her voice was as quiet as usual, and she spoke so gently and politely that, if her face had not told them so, the girls would have been deceived into thinking that she was not angry.

'I beg your pardon, but are you speaking of the lady I am living with?' she inquired of the group of uncomfortable-looking girls.

'We weren't speaking to you,' said Edith sullenly.

'No; but you were speaking of me, and I should like to know what you were saying, please,' said Jessica.

'We're awfully sorry for you, Jessica,' blurted out Bessie, without looking at her.

'Why?' asked Jessica gravely.

'Because—we hear you are starved and unkindly treated, and—and there's going to be a row about it,' explained Bessie.

The colour came into Jessica's face, and the hand by her side was clenched tightly as she answered, 'You are quite mistaken. I have quite enough to eat, so my guardian could not possibly be put in prison for starving me; and she has never been unkind to me. It was very kind of her to take us into her house when—when we lost our father; and I think it is cruel as well as impertinent to speak of her and of our private concerns like this.' Jessica's lip trembled a little as she made the above speech; after which she turned away and walked into the empty schoolroom.

It was against the rules to sit there out of class-time, but the girl felt her knees trembling under her, and wanted to be alone.

She had not sat there many minutes when the form-mistress came in, and stopped short in surprise at the sight of a pupil sitting at a desk.

Jessica never 'gave way' outwardly if she could help it, even when she was alone; and now, though she was still trembling with suppressed feeling,

she sat at her desk with a book open before her, as if she were studying her lesson, not one word of which could she see.

Her form-mistress was deceived by her attitude, and only saw a girl, as she thought, disobeying rules. 'You here, Jessica Standish! What are you doing? Don't you know that you are forbidden to come into the class-room alone?' she asked sharply.

Jessica looked up, startled. 'I beg your pardon,' she said, and rose to go without a word of excuse.

'Didn't you know the rule?' persisted the mistress, irritated at her question being ignored.

'Yes, I did. I am sorry I came in,' said Jessica quietly.

'Then you had better go and report yourself to the head-mistress for insubordination,' said the mistress, and went up to her desk, which she opened to look for some exercise-books.

If her head had not been bent to search the desk, she could not have helped seeing that Jessica could hardly walk straight, and had to steady herself by the desks as she passed out of the schoolroom.

Mrs Trotter was in her room when Jessica entered after knocking, and said in her usual grave voice, 'Miss Hanse desired me to come and tell you that she found me in the schoolroom just now.'

Mrs Trotter looked up at the voice, and gave an exclamation as she saw Jessica's white, set face. 'Sit down,' she said hastily, and added, 'Are you ill, my child? Would you like some water?'

'No, thank you; I am quite well, really,' Jessica assured her earnestly, though she sat down as desired.

'Then what is the matter? Are you in trouble?' asked Mrs Trotter, too much concerned about Jessica's appearance to say anything about her supposed 'insubordination.'

'No, thank you. I—people bother me, and I don't feel as if I could bear it,' was Jessica's somewhat lame explanation.

But Mrs Trotter was an understanding woman, and though Jessica sometimes irritated her by her reserve, she was touched by her evident trouble, and said kindly, 'The back is made for the burden, Jessica; and when things seem unbearable, it means that they have come to the worst,

and will mend. But you do not look fit to be at school. Would you like to go home?'

'Oh no, thank you. I would much rather not,' cried Jessica.

And Mrs Trotter, understanding again, replied, 'Then you had better stop in my room as a punishment for disobeying rules;' and she smiled at Jessica, for Mrs Trotter guessed that she had taken refuge in the schoolroom because, as she said, she could bear no more.

'I would rather go into the school as usual,' said Jessica, unconsciously sitting up very straight.

Mrs Trotter looked at her gravely. 'I would rather you did not. You want a rest-cure. Your nerves have been on the stretch for the last two months, and if the holidays were not close at hand I should ask the doctor to take you away. Now be a good girl and lie down on that sofa, and go to sleep if you can. I have a good deal of writing to do, so you will be quite quiet,' she said; and she took a soft down cushion from a chair and put it on the sofa, and made Jessica lie down.

She was just making the girl comfortable, when Miss Hanse came in. 'I sent Jessica Standish to you just now, but really there's no knowing what that girl will do. She evidently hasn't chosen to come. I begin to think she is as mad as her guardian,' said the form-mistress, who had not seen Jessica.

The latter, much embarrassed at hearing for the second time that day conversation not intended for her, sat up and said, 'I'm very sorry, but Mrs Manning is not mad really.'

To say that Miss Hanse was taken aback is putting it very mildly. She started violently and gave a little cry. 'Oh Jessica, I did not see you. Are you ill?' she stammered.

'Not exactly; only I feel rather stupid,' said Jessica, putting her head down again wearily.

'Lie still and try to go to sleep,' said Miss Hanse kindly as she left the room.

The head-mistress followed her. 'What made you say that Mrs Manning is mad? Have you heard anything lately?' she demanded of her colleague.

'Yes, I have, I am sorry to say,' replied the mistress, and related the same story that was going the round of the school.

Mrs Trotter looked annoyed. ‘What a place for gossip this is! I wonder how much truth there is in it. Jessica would not tell a deliberate untruth, I know, but I fancy she has persuaded herself that she can live upon very little food,’ she said.

‘That may be, and I know it is the fashion to say one can live on a crust a day, so to speak; but I don’t see how she can persuade herself that Mrs Manning is kind to her, for every one knows that she is the most disagreeable person in Bowcester, and, from all accounts, she has been downright cruel to Jessica,’ declared the form-mistress.

Mrs Trotter looked at her subordinate gravely. ‘Knowing all that, how was it you were so severe upon the poor girl when she took refuge in your schoolroom to have a few moments’ peace and quiet?’ she asked.

‘I—I didn’t know. She did not say anything or give any excuse,’ stammered Miss Hanse.

‘Jessica is not the kind of girl to say anything or to make excuses,’ objected the head-mistress.

‘I didn’t notice anything unusual about her,’ said Miss Hanse apologetically.

‘Then you could not have looked at her,’ was Mrs Trotter’s quiet reply.

‘I don’t know how it is, but Jessica manages to put people’s backs up. The girls are sorry for her, but they don’t like her; and I find it difficult to be friendly with her, much though I pity her,’ said the form-mistress.

‘That is true. She does put one’s back up, because she deliberately repels all attempts at friendship with her. But we must remember that she is in a very trying position, and there are few girls who would be as dignified as she is in such circumstances,’ said Mrs Trotter.

‘I wish I knew what really happened to-day. One might as well try to pump a stone as to get any information out of Jessica; but that something has happened is certain, or all these tales could not have got about. Perhaps Jessica has persuaded herself that there is nothing wrong, just as she has persuaded herself that she has plenty to eat, which she certainly has not, from my point of view,’ retorted the mistress.

‘I do not see what it has to do with us. We could not do Jessica any good, and I agree with her that people bother about her too much,’ said Mrs Trotter.

‘I don’t bother myself about my neighbours’ concerns generally,’ observed Miss Hanse, ‘but really it’s impossible to go anywhere without hearing Mrs Manning’s wards discussed. I think it is partly that they seem to have dropped from the skies. No one knows where they have come from; and yet they are such refined children, one feels as if they must be of good family—too good to be left to the tender mercies of that forbidding and eccentric woman. Besides, if we only knew the truth, we might stop the gossip in the school, which is very unpleasant and undesirable.’

‘I will put an end to that,’ said Mrs Trotter, looking very decided, and opening the door of the first schoolroom, which, as it happened, was Jessica’s own form-room. She walked up to the desk, followed by Miss Hanse.

‘Girls,’ she said, looking round the room at them all, ‘I hear you spend your time at recreation in discussing your schoolfellows’ private concerns. This is a bad habit, and one I do not wish to be formed in my school. At present it is Jessica Standish whose private life you are gossiping about, and I wish you once for all to understand that I forbid this subject to be mentioned in the school grounds. I cannot control your conversation outside school bounds, but I can at least prevent your giving pain to one of your number while you are under my authority;’ and then she left the room amid dead silence, and went to the other classrooms, where she repeated the same thing.

The girls were very silent when school broke up, and only casual remarks were made upon indifferent subjects, the truth being that their minds were full of Jessica and this last prohibition of the head-mistress; and as they could not speak of that, they could not think of anything else worth speaking of.

CHAPTER XX.

THE LAST STRAW.

MRS TROTTER might, and did, stop all gossip about Jessica and her guardian within the school bounds; but though a good many of the girls respected her wishes and did not mention the subject at home, a larger number were not so loyal, and no sooner were they in the street or in their own homes than they began discussing the probability of Jessica being 'taken up,' as they vaguely put it, or of Mrs Manning being put into prison, this rumour being most persistent.

Mrs Karslake heard conflicting tales, and at last met an old friend not given to gossip, who, to her surprise, stopped her and said, 'I am very sorry to hear this about Mrs Manning. Don't you think a doctor ought to see her?'

'When I know what you have heard, Mrs Brewster, I shall know what to think. I have heard all sorts of wild tales this afternoon, and don't know what to believe,' replied Mrs Karslake.

'I don't generally listen to idle chatter,' replied Mrs Brewster with a touch of superiority; 'but when I hear that a neighbour and a lady has been put into prison for cruelty to her orphan wards, I feel that it is time to take a friendly interest in her and her doings and sufferings.'

'Is she in prison? Then I really must tell Edward. He dislikes gossip so much—I tell him it is a mania with him—that he doesn't know anything that is going on round him,' said Mrs Karslake, knitting her brows, for this news affected not only Mrs Manning, but Jessica and their favourite, Cuthbert.

'Tell the Rector, by all means, and ask him if he can't do something for the poor woman. She must be demented to behave as she does. And, of course, if any subscription is got up for those poor children, I shall be glad to give a guinea,' said Mrs Brewster.

'Oh, that will not be necessary, thank you,' exclaimed Mrs Karslake hastily, for she did not like the idea of the two Standishes being objects of charity, somehow.

‘I should say it will be very necessary unless you are prepared to adopt them permanently,’ replied Mrs Brewster with some asperity, and she walked off, rather ruffled at Mrs Karslake’s reception of her offer.

The Rector’s wife went her way in a great state of excitement. She felt very indignant with Mrs Manning for her treatment of her wards, but to think of her in prison was dreadful; for, after all, she must have meant kindly by taking the children into her house, and it was probably her brain that was to blame, not her heart. So Mrs Karslake hastened her footsteps, meaning to go home and tell her husband the news of Mrs Manning’s arrest.

The Rector was as disturbed as his wife. ‘I was afraid of this when I saw that man come out of The Acacias yesterday evening, and then Mr Roberts spending so much time there to-day. We must bail her out, I suppose,’ he said.

‘And Cuthbert and Jessica must come and stay with us,’ added his wife.

‘Of course, of course,’ agreed Mr Karslake, putting on his hat and going over to The Acacias, where, naturally, he found Mrs Manning.

Mr Karslake, having ascertained that Mrs Manning was still at liberty, went off to find out from the police superintendent, who was a staunch Churchman and supporter of his, whether there really was any likelihood of Mrs Manning being put in prison and prosecuted.

But as he was walking quickly through the town he happened to glance up at the dining-room window of the ‘Crown,’ and there saw his fishing acquaintance, Mr Smithson, standing in company with another man, and looking very annoyed.

It suddenly occurred to the Rector that he could get the information he wanted from this man, and he turned into the ‘Crown’ and walked straight into the dining-room.

‘Good-morning, Mr Smithson. I thought you said that you did not intend taking any further steps in that matter about which you came to Bowcester,’ he said with his usual directness.

‘And I said what was true, sir; and I only wish some people here could say the same,’ Mr Smithson retorted rather sulkily.

‘Indeed! Then I should like to know how it is that Mrs Manning has been visited since then, and alarmed with threats of prosecution, if not at your instigation,’ inquired Mr Karslake.

‘That’s easily explained, sir. When you met me fishing, my report had been sent up to headquarters, and my part of the business was done, and I have not taken any further steps in the matter. If you had given me any information before, I should have been glad to accept it; but I was ordered off your premises, and had to get my evidence where I could,’ Mr Smithson observed with some spite.

The Rector looked at him with grave reproof. ‘If you had come to me, you would have been received with due courtesy, as I hope every one is who comes to my house; but we do not care for our servants to be encouraged to gossip about their neighbours’ private concerns,’ he said.

The man who had been talking to Mr Smithson broke in abruptly, ‘You did not tell me this, Smithson. Why did you not apply directly to the Rector, since he had taken charge of one of these wards?’ he asked.

‘I thought I had enough evidence to go upon; and so I had, if they hadn’t all denied everything,’ Smithson replied sullenly.

‘You seem to me to have made a pretty mess of of it altogether.—Perhaps you can tell me the truth of this affair, sir. I don’t wish to pry into what does not concern me, but a case of starvation is my concern, and I should be glad to be informed whether there is such a case here or not,’ said the man, addressing Mr Karslake civilly enough.

‘If there were, do you suppose that I should not have taken action?’ said the Rector. ‘I do not deny that Mrs Manning’s idea of a suitable diet for growing children and her treatment of her wards were quite mistaken at first; but she is not rich, I believe, and could not afford to give a liberal diet. However, they have had quite good food. The brother earns a little money, and could have supplemented his sister’s allowance if necessary; and in future I give you my word that they shall be well looked after.’

The Londoner’s face cleared. ‘That explains the two contradictory accounts. Well, I am glad to hear this, and I think we may safely leave this case in your hands, Mr Karslake. You are on our branch committee, so we shall look to you to be responsible for the lady’s good behaviour; and the best thing we can do is to go back to town, where there are plenty of really important cases, unfortunately,’ he observed.

Mr Karslake shook hands with them both, promised to communicate with headquarters if there was any necessity, and went back to The Acacias. But on the way he met a parishioner, who stopped him. ‘What is the matter at The Acacias, Mr Karslake? Is Mrs Manning dead?’ she inquired.

‘Dead!’ echoed the Rector, shocked. ‘I hope not. She was alive an hour ago, for she came into her garden and spoke to me. What makes you think she is dead?’

‘Because all the shutters are shut, and the baker’s boy, who was coming out of the gate, told me Kezia, who looked very much upset, did not even open the door to him, but shook her head from an upstairs window,’ said the lady.

‘Dear, dear! I must go and see. I hope nothing serious is the matter,’ said the Rector with a sigh. Mrs Manning and her doings were giving him a great deal of trouble and anxiety, and he found himself almost wishing that she had never had any wards, or at all events that they had not come to Bowcester to bring out, apparently, all that was worst in the poor woman’s character.

He hurried his steps, only to find when he arrived at The Acacias that it looked much the same as usual, and a whimsical resemblance to the legend of Mother Hubbard and her unexpected experiences made him smile.

Cuthbert opened the door to him. ‘Is it all right, sir?’ he asked anxiously.

‘Yes, my boy, I think we have got rid of our London friends and their well-meant but offensive interference. But what is this I hear about the shutters being shut?’ asked the Rector.

‘Oh, Mrs Manning got into a funk, and barricaded herself in; but Jess managed her somehow, and made her open them. She’s up with her now. I can’t think how she can do it, but she almost seems to like Mrs Manning,’ remarked Cuthbert.

‘Thank Heaven for that! I begin to see some hope for your guardian now, Cuthbert. But I should like to speak to your sister for a few minutes before I go. Do you think you could fetch her?’ inquired Mr Karslake.

‘Not if I know it! I beg your pardon, Mr Karslake. I mean, I’d rather not go near Mrs Manning; she is quite shaken up and upset, and Jessica says she must not be disturbed;’ and Cuthbert related the doings of the afternoon.

‘That is not to be wondered at. Well, we must see if Kezia is more courageous,’ said the Rector; and he called the maid, who went up to tell Jessica.

Jessica came down looking very pale and tired, but she cheered up when Mr Karslake told her his news.

‘I am so glad. It is dreadful to think Mrs Manning should be persecuted like this just because she took upon her the charge of Cuthbert and me, when she was not used to children, so that, of course, she did not understand what to do,’ said Jessica.

Mr Karslake looked kindly at Jessica. ‘I believe that is the right and charitable way of looking at it, and I hope that your troubles are now over. I have a feeling, somehow, that the sun, which has been behind the clouds lately, will shine soon, all the brighter for its absence,’ he said.

And then Jessica declared that she must go back to Mrs Manning, and said good-bye.

‘She really likes her,’ Cuthbert informed the Rector with an air of surprise.

‘You mean that Jessica likes your guardian, or that your guardian likes Jessica?’ observed the Rector.

‘Both, I think, though it seems funny; but Jess is not easy to understand, she’s such a one for doing what she thinks is her duty. In the old days she would have gone to the stake smiling,’ said Cuthbert with enthusiasm, which he tried to cover with a laugh.

The Rector did not laugh; he was too much moved. But he went back to his wife to tell her it was ‘all right at The Acacias,’ and took Cuthbert with him to stay the night, as Jessica said Mrs Manning was not well, and required perfect quiet.

But the next morning, before breakfast, Kezia came over to say that Miss Jessica seemed very poorly, and could not take even a cup of tea, and she thought some one ought to see her, though she declared that she would be quite well in an hour or so, and did not need a doctor.

Mrs Karslake thought they had better tell Cuthbert, as she could not venture to go to The Acacias without him.

Cuthbert jumped up, and was dressed in an incredibly short time. ‘Of course she must have a doctor. I’ve got money to pay for him unless he’s too dear. I know what’s the matter. She’s just worried herself till she has made herself ill. That’s another thing she has to thank Mrs Manning for,’ he declared.

Mrs Karslake was greatly afraid of meeting Mrs Manning, and went softly upstairs; but when they pushed open Jessica’s bedroom door they

drew back in surprise, for bending over her was Mrs Manning, with one hand on the sick girl's head, and another feeling her pulse.

'I'm not really ill, only stupid and tired. I'll get up directly,' they heard Jessica mutter.

The two visitors crept silently away. 'She looks awfully hot. Oughtn't she to have a doctor?' said Cuthbert when they were in the dining-room.

'Yes; but I think we may leave her to Mrs Manning for the present. I will go home, and you had better go up alone,' replied Mrs Karslake.

But before she could go away Mrs Manning came downstairs. She did not seem in the least surprised to see either of them. 'Jessica is very unwell. Will you go and fetch a doctor—the best doctor in the town?' she said to Cuthbert.

'Yes, certainly. Which is the best? Mine?' he asked Mrs Karslake.

'He is very good. Yes, I think he would do,' replied Mrs Karslake, glad to do the young doctor, who was very clever, a good turn by finding him another patient.

So Cuthbert ran off to fetch the young doctor, who came back with him, and went up to Jessica, accompanied by Mrs Manning; while Mrs Karslake, finding that her presence was not resented, waited downstairs with Cuthbert while the doctor was in the sickroom.

He made rather a long visit, and came down alone, looking rather grave, until he saw Cuthbert, when he said cheerily, 'Ha, Cuthbert, there you are! Your sister has caught a nasty chill, and I want you to come back with me and fetch some medicine for her; will you?'

'But, doctor, who is going to nurse her?' inquired Mrs Karslake.

The young doctor turned at the door. 'Mrs Manning, I suppose. She seems to be installed in the sickroom,' he said.

'But does she know anything about nursing or illness?' objected the Rector's wife.

'That we shall see. I am returning before lunch, and will let you know if she is incapable,' he remarked.

'I don't fancy you will be encouraged to visit very often,' said Mrs Karslake, who knew the young doctor very well, and was not afraid that he would misunderstand her.

The doctor laughed lightly. ‘On the contrary, it is by Mrs Manning’s desire that I am coming again this morning,’ he observed, evidently enjoying Mrs Karslake’s amazement.

‘Is Jessica so very ill, then?’ the latter asked, for she thought this could be the only explanation for such unusual conduct on Mrs Manning’s part.

‘No. She has a chill and fever, and, of course, it is more serious because she is run down; but I told Mrs Manning there was no need for me to come again before this evening unless Jessica should become suddenly worse,’ he replied.

‘Well, wonders will never cease! The woman must be converted; and, if so, it is Jessica who has done it,’ cried Mrs Karslake, in surprise.

The doctor laughed again, and went off with Cuthbert, to whom he gave the medicine, saying, ‘Don’t worry about your sister; there is no need, Cuthbert. This breakdown was bound to have come at any rate. Your sister has been strained to breaking-point. I don’t know how she has borne up these last months.’

‘How do you know anything about it?’ asked Cuthbert, half resenting this acquaintance with Jessica’s state of health and mind on the doctor’s part.

‘You don’t think it is my business—eh? Well, you see, it’s a habit on my part to study human nature, and your sister is a very interesting study, and she would have aroused my attention anyhow, because she has looked so—delicate lately,’ replied the doctor.

Cuthbert gave a sigh which was half a groan, and hurried back with the bottle of medicine, which, according to direction, he took up to Jessica’s bedroom. At the door he was met by Mrs Manning, who had evidently heard him come in, although, remembering her wishes, he had shut both the gate and the door gently.

‘How is she?’ he asked, half expecting to be snubbed; but, to his surprise and relief, Mrs Manning replied in a low voice—a voice he did not recognise as hers, ‘She is sleeping just now, but she is restless. Stay in the house, please, so that you can go for the doctor if necessary.’

Cuthbert agreed, and taking a book, went into the schoolroom, wondering greatly at this extraordinary change in their guardian, and consoling himself with the doctor’s assurance that there was no need to worry. It was only Mrs Manning’s remorse, he supposed, at which he felt a grim satisfaction.

He was not worrying, and so was soon deep in a book of adventures, which engrossed him until he heard the doctor's voice, and found that it was twelve o'clock. The morning had gone by quickly.

He waited until the young doctor came out of the sickroom, and then ran downstairs after him. 'Is she all right, doctor?' he asked.

The doctor hesitated a moment, and then said, 'Well, no; not all right. You don't get well in five minutes, my friend, even with such a clever doctor as I am; but I hope she will soon be better. Why are you here? I thought you belonged over at the Rectory. You had better go back there. You can do nothing here.'

'Not now, only in the evenings; and Mrs Manning asked me to stay, in case she wanted me to fetch you suddenly. I think I had better stop,' said Cuthbert.

'There is no need for that. Kezia can run across and tell you if you are wanted to go any errands. I will go up and speak to Mrs Manning, and make that right with her,' said the doctor; and he went upstairs and had a murmured conversation with her, and on his return told Cuthbert it was all right, and that Mrs Manning agreed that he would be better at the Rectory.

Instead of leaving the boy at the Rectory gate, he said casually, 'I think I'll come in and see the Rector. I want to speak to him;' and he went round to the study, where he found both Mr and Mrs Karslake.

'Oh, there you are, doctor! I was just wanting to see you. How is she getting on?' Mrs Karslake inquired anxiously.

'Not very well, I am sorry to say,' replied the young doctor.

'I knew that woman would be no good. Shall I go over and offer to help to nurse Jessica, or ought she to have a trained nurse?' Mrs Karslake asked.

'I was not speaking about Mrs Manning,' said the doctor. 'She is an excellent nurse, so quiet and self-controlled. I could not wish for a better one. It is my patient who is not so well. The fever is running pretty high. She must have suffered more than we know, for she is beginning to wander, and she is always muttering to herself about being brave, and having patience, and protecting Mrs Manning. The poor woman is evidently very much touched by it.'

'So she well may be,' cried Mrs Karslake; while the Rector remarked with feeling, 'Poor child, what a fine character she is!'

‘Yes,’ agreed the doctor, and added, ‘By the way, that boy ought to be kept from worrying over his sister. She is in for a sharp attack; but she has a good constitution, and we shall pull her through all right.’

‘God willing,’ put in the Rector. ‘And, doctor, remember Mrs Manning is not rich, and if Jessica wants extras we shall be only too glad to send them over.’

‘I don’t know whether she is rich or not; but she said no expense was to be spared, and even suggested a second opinion and sending to London for a specialist, which I told her was not in the least necessary,’ replied the doctor.

‘How extraordinary! I really think she is not quite sane. I don’t suppose she could pay for a London doctor to come to Bowcester. Still, I am glad she is nursing Jessica well; and we will keep Cuthbert over here if we possibly can,’ observed Mrs Karslake.

Fortunately Cuthbert had no idea that his sister was so ill, and knowing he was no use in a sickroom, allowed himself to be kept out of Jessica’s room. He accepted all Kezia’s cheerful bulletins as true, and went to bed after sending Jessica a message and his love, which the poor girl was far too ill to receive.

Mrs Manning, on the contrary, never stirred from Jessica’s room. She seemed to be made of iron, and waved aside all the doctor’s suggestions that she should have an arm-chair in the room so as to rest a little; and it was only by her pallor that the doctor saw how Jessica’s ravings affected her.

Kezia waited on her mistress and Jessica with devotion and the tears dropping all the time, until Mrs Manning said, not unkindly, ‘It’s no use going on like that, Kezia. You will only make yourself ill, and then there will be no one to make soup and things for Miss Jessica. Go and have a good supper, and then go to bed. I shall not want you again to-night.’

Kezia, scarcely believing her ears, so astonishing was this change in her mistress, did as she was told, only leaving her door open in case she might be needed, and so that she might hear any commotion in the night.

But it had been a tiring and exciting day for her as well as for every one else, and in spite of her resolve to sleep with one eye open, she shut them both, and did not open them until her usual time for getting up in the morning.

CHAPTER XXI.

TELEGRAMS AND TRIBUTES.

'EDWARD,' said Mrs Karslake to her husband the next morning, 'I have had the wildest dreams all night about Mrs Manning and Jessica. I dreamt that Mrs Manning was only pretending to be kind, and that when we all went away for the night she neglected her, and did not give her proper food or anything! I shall not have a moment's peace until I find out that it is not true.'

'That was rather an uncharitable dream, Christine, and, I fear, is the result of listening to gossip. I do not think there is any danger of its coming true. I hope and believe that things are brightening for those two orphans,' he replied.

'One thing I do not understand is what Mrs Manning meant by wanting a specialist from London, and telling the doctor to come often, and spare no expense,' observed his wife.

'The poor thing is remorseful, and wishes to try to make up for having been cold and unfeeling hitherto,' he suggested.

'I dare say she is,' replied Mrs Karslake in a tone which implied that she ought to be remorseful; 'but the point is that she can't afford it.'

'My dear, we do not know that. And it is certainly not our business,' objected the Rector.

'I am not so sure about that! Who is going to pay the doctor for all his visits, which he says himself are not absolutely necessary? It is hardly fair to him to let him give all his time to The Acacias when there is no danger, and to let him think that he has a paying case, when in all probability he will never see a penny for his pains,' argued Mrs Karslake.

'Now, Christine, I do beg you not to say anything of that kind to the doctor. He is too fond of his profession to work only for money; and at any rate it will do him good to have something to do. He has not too many patients yet, so he has plenty of time to spare, and I am glad he has The

Acacias. He is not taking them from any one else, and I have no doubt he will be paid,' said the Rector, taking up his paper to put an end to the discussion.

But before he had unfolded it, Kezia came over to ask for Master Cuthbert.

It was just breakfast-time, and the Rector and his wife were waiting in the hall lounge for Cuthbert to appear. He sometimes slept badly, and arrived down only just in time for breakfast. The Karslakes, as will be seen, rather spoilt the boy; but he was of such a bright, sunny nature that he was not easily spoilt.

'He will be down directly. Ask Kezia to come here and tell us how Miss Jessica is,' said Mrs Karslake, impulsive as usual.

'She's very bad, ma'am; and Mrs Manning, she's rare and upset, as one can see though she doesn't say much. But she wants Master Cuthbert to come over and speak to her for a minute,' said Kezia.

'Does she want him to go for the doctor?' asked the Rector, looking grave, and putting down his paper with the intention of fetching the doctor himself.

'Oh no, sir, thank you. We've sent for him. The milkman said he'd tell him—he had to go there. I never knew such goings-on as are happening at this situation. I'm sure it's like a story-book, so it is; but it's not a story I'd like to be told about me, and that's a fact,' announced Kezia.

Mr Karslake gave his wife a warning look to prevent her asking any questions and encouraging Kezia, who was evidently longing to gossip. 'Has Miss Jessica had a bad night?' he asked.

'She's been sleeping and talking most of the time, sir, Mrs Manning says. You'd think it was her own child by the way she watches her. It fair makes me giddy to think it's the same woman—lady, I mean—that wouldn't say a civil word to a neighbour before Miss Jessica came, and didn't treat her too kindly at first, nor give them too good food. And now it's the milk that isn't rich enough! The best of everything Miss Jessica's to have, and I must look after myself, as she hasn't time,' said Kezia, talking rapidly.

'I am very glad to hear it,' said the Rector, looking at his wife as much as to say she might see that she was wrong in her dreams.

Unfortunately Mrs Karslake took it as a challenge, and remarked, 'She is probably afraid that she would get into trouble if anything happened to

Jessica.'

'She seems very fond of her now, ma'am, there's no mistake about that,' said Kezia; and at this moment Cuthbert appeared, full of apologies for being so late.

'The fact is, I was having horrid dreams about Jessica; and then I lay awake ever so long, and went to sleep again after they called me. How is Jess, Kezia?' he asked her.

'Not so very well, Master Cuthbert; and the mistress would like to see you as soon as you've had your breakfast,' observed Kezia, putting in this last condition on her own account, for Cuthbert looked tired, and she thought he had better have his breakfast before he interviewed Mrs Manning or saw Jessica, who would not know him.

'I'd better run over now and just see Jess,' he observed to Mrs Karslake.

But the Rector interrupted him. 'Not before you have breakfasted, my boy. There is nothing worse for an invalid than a depressing visitor, and you would not be cheerful if you were hungry,' he argued.

So Kezia went off, and the three at the Rectory had breakfast and prayers before Cuthbert was allowed to go; and then the Rector sat down for half-an-hour's enjoyment of his daily paper before he set forth on a strenuous day's work.

Mrs Karslake generally sat near him doing accounts or making out lists of household wants, and listening between whiles to interesting items of news which her husband read out to her; but this morning he had nothing to tell her apparently, and at last his silence struck her, and she looked to ask the reason; but at sight of her husband's face she exclaimed, 'Edward, what is it? Is there bad news in the paper?'

Mr Karslake tried to look reassuring. 'It is vexatious, Christine. These newspaper men have no delicacy of feeling; they ruthlessly lay bare details of one's most private life,' he said.

Mrs Karslake looked at him, mystified. 'But, Edward, I am sure I don't care; they can't find anything to say about us except that we lead a very humdrum life, and that you devote yourself to the parish,' she objected.

'It is not us of whom they speak, but of the poor things opposite,' said Mr Karslake, looking annoyed.

'Oh dear! surely that tale has not got into the papers? What do they say?' she asked, looking vexed too.

‘What don’t they say? Here is a garbled account of the starvation diet of a noble girl, who, in spite of it all, defends her guardian, and persists that she has plenty to eat; and, what is worse, a description of her personal appearance. It is intolerable! Freedom of the press is one thing, and quite right and proper; but this exceeds the bounds of legitimate news,’ cried Mr Karslake.

‘How horrid! There’s one comfort; Jessica will know nothing about it, and we must manage that Cuthbert does not hear it. Fortunately he never reads the newspapers,’ said Mrs Karslake, coming to look over her husband’s shoulder.

‘No; and I do not fancy any one will care to mention it to him, and I think we can rely upon our local editors not to copy it, out of respect for our feelings and those two children’s,’ said Mr Karslake.

‘ “The young lady, who looked pale and ill-nourished, took her cruel guardian’s arm and exclaimed, ‘I have had plenty to eat, and my guardian has never been unkind to me,’ ” ’ read out Mrs Karslake in indignant tones, and continued: ‘I should think it was libellous. They have no right to call any one cruel unless they can prove it, and they will find that difficult if we all refuse to give evidence. And just listen to this: “Miss Jessica Standish is an extremely good-looking girl, with an air of distinction.” Really, Edward, you will have to stop this paper; it is too low and vulgar.’

‘I shall have to stop any more being published on this subject. If they get hold of Jessica’s illness, that will be copy for another sensational article,’ said the Rector.

‘Yes; and I should not trust to our local editors’ respect for our feelings. Journalists sometimes seem to me to forget everything when it is a case of getting good copy for their papers,’ said his wife.

Mr Karslake could not honestly contradict this, so he said nothing; but presently he took his hat and stick and went down town.

Cuthbert meantime had gone straight up to Jessica’s room, where he found Mrs Manning looking pale and worried, but otherwise as neat and fresh as if she had not sat up all night.

‘She is rather quieter now, Cuthbert, and the fever has gone down a little,’ she said. Even in his anxiety Cuthbert noticed that she was changed, and that for the first time she had called him by his name.

He stepped on tiptoe to the bed and looked at Jessica, who to his unpractised eye did not seem to be very ill; but suddenly there came to him a

remembrance of what she had been less than three months ago, and he exclaimed impulsively, 'She is changed.'

Poor Mrs Manning thought he meant since her illness, and said in a low tone, 'The fever has been very high, but she is able to take milk; and she is such a good patient that we shall pull her through. What I wanted to ask you was whether you would like to come and stop here all day, to be near Jessica.'

Cuthbert did not understand. 'Oh yes, of course I will stay in the house if you wish it, and if it will do Jessica any good; but I am doing some work for Mr Karslake, and I can't stop that very well. Besides, I earn money that way, and we shall want money to pay Jessica's doctor's bill,' he replied.

'There is no necessity for that. There is money for anything you want, and you shall have whatever money you want,' said Mrs Manning.

'Oh, thank you, thank you,' stammered Cuthbert, embarrassed at this change in his guardian.

'You have nothing to thank me for—but—it will be different now,' she said, and turned abruptly to Jessica, who moved restlessly and began to mutter.

Cuthbert stood there for a moment, not knowing what to say or do. He was like a fish out of water in a sickroom. But as he stood there he heard Mrs Manning murmur, 'What is it, my darling?' And he turned and went softly out of the room.

The doctor came and went; and Mr Karslake presently came and took Cuthbert over to lunch, and wondered whether he looked so absent-minded because he was thinking of his sister, although he did not seem to be worrying about her.

'Does Jessica know you, Cuthbert?' asked Mrs Karslake.

'She was dozing when I saw her. But she does not look very ill; she has a nice colour,' he replied.

And Mrs Karslake, seeing that he evidently had no idea that his sister was really ill, was careful not to enlighten him, though she remarked to her husband afterwards that she was surprised at such innocence in an intelligent boy of his age.

'I think that the boy is a little dazed. That blow, coming upon the top of the other troubles and changes in his life, has had an effect upon his health. I sometimes think it would perhaps be better to let the boy follow his wish

and go to sea. He wants a thorough change. Bowcester is too full of painful memories for him, and it is very bad for a boy of his age and temperament to go through such unpleasant experiences,' said Mr Karslake.

'It would be the last straw if he got wind of this impertinent article in the paper. Have you stopped the local papers copying?' inquired his wife.

'Yes. Both Hodges and Williams [the editors of the rival papers] were very nice about it. They spoke with great feeling about Jessica; and no wonder. She is a girl in a thousand,' said Mr Karslake.

'Yes, you always said so; but I wish she were less reserved. However, I am glad we shall not have the *Bowcester Mercury* and *County Chronicle* full of this supposed starvation case,' said his wife.

'So am I. Moreover, they have undertaken to put a stopper on the London daily, and are pointing out to them that they have made themselves liable to an action for defamation of character by Mrs Manning, which they say will frighten the London editor.'

This matter being settled, the only trouble was Jessica's illness; and Mr Karslake was glad when, at tea-time, the young doctor dropped in.

'There's a bevy of youth and beauty outside your gate, Rector, but they seem shy about coming in,' he remarked as he took an easy-chair.

'That is not a characteristic of youth and beauty of the present day,' said Mrs Karslake, laughing.

'Who are they, doctor?' asked the Rector.

'High School girls; and I expect they have come to inquire after their schoolfellow, whom they did not appreciate when she was with them, if all one hears be true,' remarked the doctor.

'That is the way of the world. But if they are really too shy to come in, I will go out to them,' said the Rector, good-naturedly getting up. 'How is the patient, doctor?'

'Pretty bad; but that was only to be expected. The fever must run its course. And she is being well nursed and looked after. Some women are born nurses. Mrs Manning is one,' observed the doctor.

The Rector waited for his account, and then went out to the girls.

He found, as the doctor had said, a group of girls outside the gate, and Edith Gould, at sight of him, said, 'Oh, please, Mr Karslake, could you tell us how Jessica Standish is?'

‘Not so well this afternoon; but she has a good constitution, and we hope she will be better in a day or two,’ he replied.

‘Please’ — — began Bessie, and looked uncomfortable.

‘Yes? What is it? Any message I can give for you?’ said the Rector, smiling encouragingly at them.

‘Please, we thought perhaps she might want some things—something for an invalid, and we have got up a subscription; only we don’t want her to know, of course,’ said Bessie, holding out an envelope upon which was written: ‘15s. for invalid foods.’

The Rector took it, much touched. ‘It is very kind of you, but you will be glad to hear that Mrs Manning is getting her everything she can possibly want, and is nursing her most devotedly. How would it do to spend this upon a basket of flowers from her schoolfellows?’

The girls, with one consent, agreed; and Mr Karslake undertook that a beautiful basket of flowers should be bought and brought to the Rectory the next day (when Jessica would be able to appreciate it more), and that the subscribers should come to tea to see it before it was sent in with a little letter of good wishes and their names; and the girls went off, made happy, as usual, by Mr Karslake’s kindness and tact.

It was July, and the chief florist of the town promised to give a beautiful basket with choice flowers and ribbons for the money; but before this was presented other events happened which drove this small matter for the moment completely out of Mr and Mrs Karslake’s head.

The first was the arrival of a long telegram for Cuthbert, who, instead of reading it out or answering it, suddenly looked very angry, and said, ‘No answer,’ at the same time tearing it and the prepaid answer form up into little bits.

In about an hour came another urgent telegram and another prepaid answer; whereupon Cuthbert, who seemed to be in an odd humour, told the boy the answer was, ‘Find out.’

‘Cuthbert, my boy, I do not wish to interfere, and, as you know, I never have interfered or asked you any questions; but if that is from a relative, I think you had better answer it civilly,’ said the Rector.

‘He doesn’t deserve it, sir; but I suppose I’ve got to say something;’ and Cuthbert wrote on a telegram-form: ‘Don’t know what you have heard, but

it's not true. We are with kind friends. Jessica is ill with high fever.—CUTHBERT STANDISH.'

He addressed the telegram himself, and said to the boy, 'Mind you hold your tongue.'

From which his host and hostess guessed he did not wish the name of his correspondent to be known, and asked him no questions; and Cuthbert presently strolled out of the house with his hands in his pockets, and crossing the road, went into The Acacias.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TIDE TURNS.

He went upstairs and put his head in at the door of Jessica's room, which stood open, for the weather was very warm. Mrs Manning was fanning Jessica with a large, old-fashioned fan. Cuthbert went softly up to the bedside. 'Let me do that,' he said; and Mrs Manning gave up the fan, for, truth to tell, her arm was tired.

'She is a little better, I think. She woke up just now and spoke quite sensibly,' Mrs Manning told him.

'That's a good job, because Cousin Maurice is very likely coming down to-morrow,' remarked Cuthbert in a low tone.

'Mr Maurice Bentley! What is making him take an interest in you now?' cried Mrs Manning with annoyance.

'I don't know. He's been hearing about us; but I told him we were quite happy with kind friends,' said Cuthbert.

'I hope Jessica will be better before he comes. I do not want him to take her away,' said Mrs Manning, looking at Jessica with an expression on her face that Cuthbert had never seen before.

'He won't do that. He wouldn't be bothered with us when father asked him; and we won't go to him, and he can't force us, unless you wish us to go,' said the boy, who seemed quite easily to have dropped into intimacy with Mrs Manning.

'Oh yes, he can. He is your nearest relative except the old'—— began Mrs Manning.

But Cuthbert hastily put in, 'We could not possibly go to him. Father never even took us to visit him. He said he was not a nice person at all.'

'There is nothing against your living with Mr and Mrs Maurice Bentley, and they have a beautiful place. You must not refuse to go there if they ask you; it would not be right,' said Mrs Manning.

‘I don’t suppose they will. Mrs Maurice is too fond of enjoying herself, and doesn’t care for children. Besides, she hates me, of course,’ he observed.

‘She has none of her own? Then you are the heir,’ said Mrs Manning, in surprise.

‘Yes. Didn’t you know? But they may have a hundred children, father said, and I was not to think about it; so I don’t,’ said Cuthbert.

‘Then you must not stop here; it is not a fit education for you. Mr Bentley ought to be ashamed of himself;’ and then she added humbly, ‘and so am I.’

‘Oh, gammon! Shall I get some more ice?’ asked Cuthbert quickly, fighting shy of sentiment.

He was chipping the block of ice with an ice-needle to cool Jessica’s barley-water, when Kezia, looking flustered, came up. ‘There’s a motor at the door, and the chauffeur says his master wishes to see you, Master Cuthbert. It’s a grand motor,’ she added.

‘He’s motored over from Crambey. I might have known he’d come when I said Jess was ill,’ said Cuthbert, stopping his ice-chipping operation for a moment; and then, after consideration, he took up the little hammer again, and remarked carelessly, ‘Tell him I’m busy chopping ice for my sister’s barley-water, and can’t come down.’

‘No, no, Cuthbert, that won’t do. It is Mr Bentley, I am sure, and you must go down and see him; but tell him Jessica can’t see any one to-day,’ said Mrs Manning.

Cuthbert did not seem to resent Mrs Manning’s orders, and reluctantly wiping his hands, went downstairs.

‘Hallo! How d’you do?’ he said in an off-hand way, going out to the motor which stood throbbing at the gate.

‘How do you do, Cuthbert? How is Jess? I’m most awfully sorry about all this; but if you had only written a line, we would have come and fetched you away at once. Uncle Nat is in a fine stew about you,’ said Mr Bentley, leaning over the side of the motor and speaking in an apologetic manner.

‘Jess is too ill to see you, and it’s a jolly sight too late for Uncle Nat or any of you to bother about us; and we’re all right, thanks, though it’s not your fault that we are not all wrong,’ said Cuthbert with a sudden flash of anger.

‘Why didn’t you write? How were we to know that your father had chosen such an awful woman as your guardian? I’d prosecute her myself, only we don’t want any more scandal,’ said Mr Bentley, who really seemed very sorry.

‘What scandal? It’s only a little gossip in the town. How did you come to hear it?’ asked Cuthbert.

‘Only a little gossip in the town!’ echoed Mr Bentley. ‘Haven’t you seen the newspaper, then? Well, perhaps it’s just as well; and, after all, it will blow over, and no one connects it with our family.’

‘That’s a blessing. I don’t want to be connected with you, I’m sure. I didn’t know they had put it in the papers. Anyway, no one here has ever heard your name; we took good care of that,’ said Cuthbert hotly.

‘How could you avoid it? I saw they called you plain Standish, but your letters must have been addressed Bentley-Standish,’ said Mr Bentley.

‘We have had no letters from you or Uncle Nat, and there was no one else to write,’ said Cuthbert.

‘No friends! What an odd thing! Well, it’s all over now. We are going to take you back with us, and send you to the seaside under some kind person’s care. And you are going to Harrow. I can manage that under the circumstances. And Jessica is going to be with a first-rate governess,’ announced Mr Bentley.

All this time the two had been talking at the roadside. Cuthbert did not invite his cousin to come in, and Mr Bentley did not seem anxious to do so. In fact, his one idea seemed to be to get off again; but Jessica’s illness was a difficulty, and as Cuthbert said she was too ill to see him, he saw that it would be impossible to take the two away with him, as he had intended.

‘We don’t want to go back with you, and Jess is too ill to be moved to-day,’ said Cuthbert.

‘Who is looking after her? Who are those kind friends you speak of in your telegram?’ demanded Mr Bentley.

‘The Rector and his wife and Mrs Manning. She’s nursing Jess,’ replied Cuthbert.

‘Mrs Manning! Why, that’s the dreadful woman who has been ill-treating her. That must be stopped at once,’ cried Mr Bentley, rousing himself and getting out of the car.

‘She’s nursing her splendidly. You can ask the doctor, if you don’t believe it. But you can’t go in and make a row, because Mrs Manning’s been sitting by Jess’s bedside since yesterday morning, and she’s dead-tired; so you mustn’t go bothering her,’ declared Cuthbert.

‘But, bless me! I can’t make head or tail of this. According to that wretched journalist who has been down here ferreting out things, she is a positive brute, and you tell me she’s sitting up all night nursing Jessica. What on earth is the truth of it all? I suppose I had better see this doctor. You needn’t mention my name, you know,’ said Mr Bentley.

‘Oh, don’t you worry; he’s not a snob, and he won’t care a twopenny dump who you are. He’s much more interested in us. I’ll just say you are my cousin. I suppose you don’t mind that?’ said Cuthbert.

‘No, of course not. You are my cousin, and, as I said before, it’s all been a mistake. You should make allowances for us, Cuthbert; but you are just like your father, so impulsive and proud, throwing back people’s kindness in their face if it isn’t offered at once.’

‘I don’t want to be like any one better than my father. I wish I were clever like him,’ said Cuthbert in a subdued voice.

‘He was very clever, if only he hadn’t dabbled in stocks, and lost his own and every one else’s money. You can’t expect people to take that lying down, Cuthbert,’ said his cousin, who had left the motor and was walking down towards the young doctor’s house.

‘He would have won it all back again if he had lived, and paid you all back; and as he couldn’t, I’m going to one day, if I live long enough. Anyway, though he lost her money, Mrs Manning did take us in, though she was poor,’ said Cuthbert.

‘She was well paid,’ said Mr Bentley.

‘Paid! By whom?’ exclaimed Cuthbert, stopping short in surprise.

‘Out of your mother’s estate. It was not much, but you have three hundred pounds a year each; so how were we to know the woman would be such a villain as to take it all and starve you? Though, to be sure, you look fairly well under the régime.’

Cuthbert made no reply. This was news to him, and he found himself struggling with a feeling of indignation against Mrs Manning. So that was what she had meant that first day when she had told them that she was going to be paid back all the money she had lost while she had a chance. They had

thought she was cracked, because they did not know about this money of their mother's, but she had evidently meant to take it all till she had repaid herself. Cuthbert ground a stone under his foot as he thought of all Jessica's sufferings, and his friendly feeling towards Mrs Manning received a severe check.

'Here's the doctor's,' he said, and Mr Bentley rang the bell. 'I think I had better see this man alone,' he said.

'All right; I'll go back to The Acacias,' replied Cuthbert, and he walked off. Strange to say, he resented more the passive neglect of his relations than the active ill-treatment of the embittered woman who was now trying to make up for her past misdeeds. Still, when he arrived at The Acacias he went up to the schoolroom, not feeling as if he could face her yet.

Mrs Manning came out of the sickroom. 'Where is Mr Bentley, and what does he intend to do?' she asked Cuthbert.

'He intends to send me to Harrow, if he can get me in; and Jess is to go to the seaside, and then have a finishing governess,' he replied quite civilly; but for the life of him he could not help a coldness creeping into his voice.

Mrs Manning felt the change in him, and said, 'Perhaps it would be best; but she must stay a few days until she is stronger; and it would have been different if you had stayed. I would have tried to make you happy. However, it is my own fault; it's too late now. Everything has been too late for me,' she said almost to herself.

Cuthbert felt sorry for her, but did not know what to say. If he and Jessica had three hundred pounds a year each, he did not see why Mrs Manning had said she could not afford to send him to Harrow, as his father had wished. She might have kept one hundred pounds a year for herself to repay her losses. But she had been very wicked, and he could not quite forgive her.

Mr Bentley did not return that evening. Cuthbert supposed he had satisfied himself that they were all right for the present at all events, and would write or come for them later on, and he decided that they would go.

Next morning the boy went to see Jessica, and found her wide awake and very white. 'I say, Jess, do you feel worse?' he asked anxiously.

'No, better, thank you, Cuthbert,' she said, smiling.

'Cuthbert prefers you with red cheeks, Jessica,' said Mrs Manning with a grim smile.

Jessica put out her hand and stroked Mrs Manning's. 'I don't; and now that I am better, you will go to bed, won't you?' she begged.

Mrs Manning shook her head. 'I'll stop with you as long as you are with me. Your relations will be taking you away directly,' she said.

'Not if you will keep us—that is, if we are not too great a trouble,' said Jessica.

Cuthbert looked up at Mrs Manning, wondering what she would say. He had not long to wait.

'You are not a trouble. I—your mother left money which could not be touched by your father's creditors, and—you can afford to go to good schools. I have done very wrong,' said Mrs Manning.

Jessica took her hand. 'I knew about that money, but I wanted you to have it. Don't, please, speak of it; it's all over, and we are going to be very happy now. I don't want to go to any better school than the High School, and I am going to stay with you,' she declared.

'Cousin Maurice has been here, Jess, and he wants us to go to the seaside, and I think we had better go,' persisted Cuthbert.

'I don't feel well enough,' said Jessica feebly.

'Not yet, of course; but you will be all right in a few days. And I want to get away from Bowcester; I hate the place,' he wound up hotly.

'Oh Cuthbert!' cried Jessica reproachfully.

'It is no wonder, Jessica; and I think he is right. I have brought dishonour on the name of Standish. I ought never to have dropped the Bentley. It is your real name; the Standish was only added for the property. You must leave Bowcester, and start life again as Miss Bentley-Standish, and no one will remember that you were once with an ogress like me,' Mrs Manning said sadly.

'We will start life again together somewhere else. I should like to go to the seaside, but you must come too,' declared Jessica.

Next day Mr and Mrs Maurice Bentley came again, and this time they saw Jessica, but not Mrs Manning, who, tired out, was lying down.

Jessica was much better. 'It was only a bad cold,' she said, and she persisted that she would not leave Mrs Manning. 'She will not be so saving again. It was a mistake, and she is sorry. Besides, if we go away now it will

make people think she really was cruel, and that is not true. And father wished us to come to her,' Jessica insisted.

'Then she had better take you to the seaside, and Cuthbert had better have a tutor to coach him for Harrow,' suggested Mrs Bentley, evidently relieved to find that she need not be bothered with the brother and sister.

Mr Bentley was not so easily satisfied. 'It must be some seaside place within reach of us, and we must have some unprejudiced person to give weekly reports of your welfare. I'm not going to risk another—er—that is to say, I must know that you are well and happy,' he said, a sign from his wife warning him not to mention the newspaper story.

They were sitting there talking, when Kezia opened the door and came in, bearing the enormous basket of beautiful flowers which had been ordered by Jessica's schoolfellows.

Jessica's face beamed with pleasure, especially when she read the note, which she handed on to her cousin.

'Very gratifying, I'm sure. I am glad you have made such a good impression upon your schoolfellows,' said Mr Bentley, looking pleased.

'I did not know I had. I thought I had been very disagreeable and proud,' remarked Jessica.

'Oh, people of that sort respect one more if one keeps them at a distance,' said Mrs Bentley loftily.

'There are some people who have been very kind to us, Cousin Maurice, and they are the Rectory people. I wish you would go and thank them,' said Jessica.

She looked so pale and thin, and something about her made them feel so ashamed of themselves, that Mr and Mrs Bentley agreed willingly to go across to the Rectory with Cuthbert, who remarked mischievously, 'What name would you like to go under here?'

'Our own, of course,' said Mrs Bentley tartly. But when they came into the dainty lounge hall, and saw the Rector and his wife, and noticed how fond they seemed to be of Cuthbert, and he of them, she and her husband made pretty speeches which were not insincere.

'We owe you a great deal, Mr Karslake, you and your wife, for your kindness to my cousins; but, in justice to ourselves, we must say that we had no idea their money was not being made use of for themselves,' Mr Bentley remarked.

‘We owe Cuthbert a great deal. Half the credit of this new invention of mine, which I have just patented, is due to him, and I shall miss him woefully if he goes away,’ said the Rector.

‘He must come and see you, and you must come and see him at Bentley,’ said Mr Bentley heartily.

Mr Karslake looked up quickly. It dawned upon him that these must be the Bentleys of Bentley; but he only thanked them, and they soon after took their leave.

When they had gone Mrs Karslake went to the library, and presently came back with a Debrett. ‘I knew it, Edward. Didn’t I say that those children were some one?’ she cried.

‘Whether you said it or not, they could not very well be no one,’ said her husband dryly.

‘You know very well what I mean, Edward. They are the Bentley-Standishes. Their father took the name for some property he inherited from his mother; and if this Maurice Bentley does not have any children, Cuthbert is his heir, and he is the heir to Lord Bentley. Fancy, if Cuthbert should be Lord Bentley one day!’ cried his wife, in excitement.

‘I don’t fancy it at all. I’d rather he was an engineer. And pray don’t talk of it, Christine; the story of their stay in Bowcester had much better not be connected with them under their full name. It is just as well they dropped the first one,’ observed her husband.

‘People won’t think anything of it, if they are rich and have a handle to their name,’ said Mrs Karslake.

‘But they may never have any title or position. Three hundred pounds a year is not a fortune. Besides, they themselves will feel it, and the sooner it is forgotten, for all parties, the better,’ said her husband with decision.

And Mrs Karslake, to whom this newspaper scandal had taught a lesson, took his advice, and never mentioned to her friends that Jessica and Cuthbert Standish were of an ancient family, and very near to the title.

CHAPTER XXIII.

JESSICA'S TRIALS END HAPPILY.

SOME time after this Cuthbert tossed and turned one night, and the next day he went over to sit with Jessica, who was making a rapid recovery, now that her troubles and anxieties were over, and that Mrs Manning had changed so completely.

'I say, Jess,' he said, after a silence of unusual length for him, 'do you really mean to come back and live in Bowcester after the holidays?'

'I would rather not, if I can persuade Mrs Manning to live somewhere else. I don't think the air suits me,' said Jessica quite sincerely.

Cuthbert gave a short laugh. 'I don't think it has suited either of us. Perhaps it hasn't suited Mrs Manning; but you know you can't go on living with her unless she'—— He paused, not knowing quite how to express himself.

'Oh, but it will be all right now. You see, she was angry about losing her money, and wanted to get it back; and I suppose she thought our money ought to belong to her, as father lost hers,' said Jessica; 'and now she sees that it was not right to take it all.'

'That's putting it mildly. And, look here, sis, I can't go to school and leave you with her unless I am sure it is going to be all right,' argued Cuthbert.

'It is indeed, Cuthbert. If you only knew how sorry she was when I was ill; and she promised to try to make me happy. And I know this was what father wished. He said we should find her a little hard, but I was not to take any notice, and try to make her happy,' Jessica told him.

'But they say she has been like this—never seeing any one ever since she came to Bowcester. That was long before father lost her money. Fancy living in this little house if she had enough money to live in a decent one! And why should you do it, even if she wants to?' objected Cuthbert.

Jessica hesitated a minute. 'I don't know whether father meant me to tell you this, but perhaps I had better, or else you won't understand. He told me that once he had been engaged to Mrs Manning'— — began Jessica.

'What!' broke in Cuthbert. 'You must be dreaming, Jess. Father could never have cared about that old'— —

'Don't, Cuthbert. He thought he did till he met mother, and she was so pretty and so sweet that he fell in love with her, and told poor Mrs Manning (only she was not Mrs Manning then; she was Miss some one); and she wrote and told him she had found out her mistake too, and was going to marry Mr Manning. But that was only because she was so proud; she really liked father. And Mr Manning was not very kind to her; and then he died, and she came to live in Bowcester,' explained Jessica.

'What an extraordinary story!' cried Cuthbert.

'Yes. But it makes one understand her better, because her husband used to take all her money, and that's why she came to live in this little house. And then, when father saw her husband's death in the paper, he wrote and asked her if he could do anything for her; and she said he could tell her what to do with her money, which wanted reinvestment. She knew father was a director of a company that gave good interest.'

Cuthbert groaned. 'That unlucky company; it has made us no end of enemies. I wonder if I shall ever live to pay them off,' he said.

'We have won one enemy over, Cuthbert; and I think Cousin Maurice does not feel unkindly to us now. And it was not father's fault; he thought it was going to be a good thing for everybody, and he lost all his own money, and it killed him,' said Jessica.

Cuthbert was silent; and his sister continued: 'So, you see, Mrs Manning will feel different, now that she likes us; and she has a little money of her own, so that we can live in a nicer house. Besides, there is the dower-house at Bentley. You know Uncle Nat offered it to father, and we should have gone there if he had lived. I was wondering if Mrs Manning would care for that.'

'The very thing! What a good idea of yours, Jess! Uncle Nat would give it like a shot; and as he is never at Bentley he would not bother you, and you would be among our own people, and Mrs Manning would have to behave —oh, well, Jess, one must look things in the face, and take precautions—and you would be near enough to Cousin Maurice and Mrs Maurice for them to look after you a little,' cried Cuthbert eagerly, and heaved a sigh of relief.

Jessica gave her low laugh, which Cuthbert had not heard for some time. ‘So all is well that ends well,’ she remarked.

They were still discussing their future when Mrs Manning came in with a newspaper in her hand. ‘You did not know much of your grand-uncle, Lord Bentley, did you?’ she asked.

‘No. He used to send us birthday presents, and father used to go and see him, and he came to see us sometimes; but we never went to see him. He is not a very nice old man, I think,’ said Cuthbert.

‘Then you will not be shocked to hear that he is dead. He had a fall from his horse, and at his advanced age—he was eighty—the shock was too much for him,’ said Mrs Manning, quoting from the newspaper she held in her hand.

The brother and sister were silent for a moment. Though they had not known him, he was their father’s uncle, and had sent them handsome birthday presents.

‘Poor old Uncle Nat!’ said Cuthbert, and added, ‘Then Cousin Maurice is Lord Bentley.’

‘Yes,’ said Jessica, and looked at her brother. She was thinking that now Cuthbert was the heir-presumptive to the title, but she did not say so.

Not long afterwards a motor came over from Crambey with a letter from Mr (now Lord) Bentley, telling Cuthbert he must come to the funeral.

‘He won’t even send a telegram now, for fear it might leak out that the starved orphans are his nephew and niece,’ was Cuthbert’s comment; for he had read the newspaper tale, and, if truth be told, was more anxious than ever to leave Bowcester.

So he hurried over to the Rectory to say good-bye to Mr and Mrs Karslake, after making them promise to come to Bentley; adding with an effort, ‘It belongs to Cousin Maurice, now that he’s Lord Bentley; and I’m really Cuthbert Bentley-Standish. I couldn’t tell you, because Mrs Manning made us promise not to be anything but plain Standish here; but she’s got into her right mind now, so it’s all right. But I’m going to be an engineer, whatever happens, sir;’ and Cuthbert looked with his frank eyes into Mr Karslake’s.

‘I’m glad to hear it. You have borne poverty well, my boy. I hope you will bear wealth, if it comes to you, as well; it is sometimes the greater trial of the two,’ said the Rector.

‘I shall know what it feels like to be poor, anyhow; so if I ever am rich I sha’n’t keep it all to myself,’ said Cuthbert, smiling, and went off cheerfully.

Mrs Karslake sighed. ‘We shall miss him woefully,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ said her husband; and then, anxious to give her something else to think about, he observed, ‘You might go over and see Jessica. She and Mrs Manning may want some assistance in getting mourning. It is some time since Mrs Manning did that kind of shopping.’

Mrs Karslake brightened up. ‘I will certainly go over. Even if she is unpleasant, Jessica will be glad to see me.’

But Mrs Manning was a changed woman; there was a light in her eyes that was new, and she looked with affection, which was almost adoration, at Jessica. ‘It is very kind of you, Mrs Karslake. I was just saying to Jessica that I was afraid I did not know much about the fashions, it’s so long since I troubled my head about such matters; but if you would be so good as to help us, we might both get some new clothes. I was thinking we might go to Bristol for the day to-morrow, if Jessica feels strong enough, and buy ourselves some smart frocks for the seaside,’ she said.

Mrs Karslake hid her amazement, and said cordially, ‘I shall be delighted. There are excellent shops at Bristol, and we can catch a through train at ten o’clock, which only takes about an hour;’ and then she began talking over necessary purchases with the delight of a young girl, in which Jessica joined; and Mrs Manning—stiffly, it is true—agreed to whatever Jessica proposed, until Mrs Karslake felt that the fear was lest Jessica should be spoiled by her guardian, if a character like hers could be spoiled.

Three days later Cuthbert met them at Crambey Junction, where they went in Lord Bentley’s car to the seaside.

Cuthbert looked older in his black suit, and graver. The ceremony had evidently made an impression upon him, and he seemed a little excited.

Jessica, noticing this, talked about other things; and Cuthbert, suddenly looking at Mrs Manning with a mischievous smile, said, ‘I didn’t know you at first.’

‘Doesn’t that gray dress look nice? Black does not suit Mrs Manning at all,’ said Jessica.

‘You look most awfully young. I expect Cousin Maurice will say you want a chaperon,’ suggested Cuthbert, his spirits rising as the motor spun

along, with his sister and his guardian both looking so well dressed and happy.

Mrs Manning, who did look years younger and better-looking, smiled and looked pleased, though she did not talk much. She had been silent too many years to find speech easy yet.

However, Cuthbert and Jessica found plenty to say to each other; and though he did not mention Uncle Nat, Cuthbert told her about Bentley and the people there, who were all so pleased to see him.

'And I've been over the dower-house. It's a jolly nice place, with big rooms and a lovely garden and big conservatory. I do hope you won't mind living there. It's a very decent part, quite near a town; so Jess could have first-class masters. But Cousin Maurice is writing to you, so he'll explain all that,' said Cuthbert, turning to Mrs Manning.

'I? But you don't want me to live with you?' said Mrs Manning, looking at Cuthbert.

'Yes, we do. We're going to make you most awfully comfortable and jolly,' said Cuthbert, looking very pleased.

Jessica looked at him inquiringly, but Cuthbert avoided her eye. 'Won't the dower-house be rather a big house to keep up, Cuthbert?' she asked.

'Not for us. We can afford it,' he replied.

'But, Cuthbert, we don't want to spend all our money, you know. We want to pay off the creditors,' objected Jessica, looking reproachfully at him; for Cuthbert seemed so light-hearted, and talked as if he thought they were going to be well-off again, which Jessica knew they would not be, even with their six hundred and Mrs Manning's small income, considering that Harrow would swallow up most of Cuthbert's income.

'That's all right,' said Cuthbert with what seemed to Jessica unwonted callousness.

She was so displeased that she did not say anything. But her displeasure did not seem to crush Cuthbert at all; in fact, he seemed highly amused at it, and insisted upon pointing out the beauties of the landscape and enjoying himself immensely.

At last they arrived at the fashionable watering-place, and, to Jessica and Mrs Manning's astonishment, drove up to a beautiful house standing in its own grounds.

‘Cuthbert, whose house is this?’ demanded Jessica.

‘I don’t know. Ours for the present. Cousin Maurice has rented it for us, so don’t worry,’ said Cuthbert, jumping out of the car, and helping Mrs Manning and his sister to alight.

Jessica said no more, though she rather wondered at this generosity on her cousin’s part.

‘I suppose Lord Bentley is rich, now that he has inherited his uncle’s property,’ she said.

‘Yes, he’s rich enough; but he wasn’t poor before, and he has not inherited it all. But isn’t there a letter from him?’ inquired Cuthbert, turning to the footman who answered the door.

‘Yes, sir, there is a letter for Mrs Manning,’ said the man, bringing it to that lady.

While she was reading it Cuthbert said, ‘Come and have a look round; it’s not half a bad place, and there’s a tennis-lawn.’

‘Have we all this house to ourselves?’ asked Jessica when she had been the round, and found that there were a great many rooms and several servants.

‘Yes, of course. Why not? Don’t people generally have houses to themselves?’ inquired Cuthbert.

‘Yes, if they can afford it; but who is paying for all this?’ she demanded.

‘Cousin Maurice is, out of our money,’ said he.

‘Cuthbert, he never can!’ protested Jessica, quite disturbed. ‘He can’t know how little we have. Oh Cuthbert, what are you thinking about to let him? We should have been quite happy in a smaller house. Do let us write and tell him this one is too big.’

‘Don’t excite yourself, Jess; we can afford it all right. Poor old Uncle Nat has left us a heap of money. He was ever so much richer than we knew; and we are going to have a motor and everything we want, Cousin Maurice says.’

But Jessica’s face did not lighten. ‘It ought to be given to the creditors. I simply won’t use it until they are paid,’ she said decidedly.

‘You might give other people credit for honourable feeling,’ said Cuthbert loftily, and added with triumph, ‘They are all paid. Uncle Nat

arranged that before he died. It appears Cousin Maurice went to see him, and told him how we were saving and working to pay them off, and he sat down and wrote to the solicitors; and the cheque he made out paying all father's creditors was the last he ever wrote,' said Cuthbert with feeling in his voice.

The tears came into Jessica's eyes. 'Oh Cuthbert, it is splendid! Things are turning out delightfully. Then has he paid Mrs Manning too?'

'Yes; that letter is to tell her so; and Cousin Maurice, who is our trustee, has asked her to come and live at the dower-house with us. Let's go and see what she says. I say, Jess, that was a jolly good idea of yours togging her out in gray. She looks jolly fine. I was wondering what she'd look like when she arrived here,' observed Cuthbert.

'She always looked a lady,' said Jessica.

'She looks much more so now, anyhow,' he retorted.

Mrs Manning was in the pretty morning-room when they went back into the house, the tears streaming down her face. Cuthbert made a movement to escape; but she wiped away her tears, and said with a queer laugh, the first laugh they had ever heard her give, 'Don't go away; I am not going to be foolish any more. But I am so happy, and I have not been happy for such a long time.'

'Then you will come to the dower-house?' said Jessica anxiously.

'Yes, if you are not afraid to have me,' said Mrs Manning.

But Jessica ignored this remark. 'Then I have only one wish left in the world,' she said.

'What is that, dear?' inquired Mrs Manning.

'To have Mr and Mrs Karslake and Ivonne Beddard here to stay with us,' replied Jessica.

'Then ask them, Jessica; there is plenty of room. Ask any one you like,' replied her guardian promptly.

A week later a happy and merry party sat down to lunch in the pretty seaside villa. Mr and Mrs Karslake had not decided where to go for their holidays, and agreed to come for August, as the Rector was run down and wanted a rest, and missed Cuthbert; and Ivonne accepted the invitation with alacrity.

‘I little thought you were such a grand person when I saw you sitting under the trees,’ she said to Jessica.

‘But I am not,’ replied Jessica earnestly. ‘I’m nobody, really. People will address us as Honourables on the letters, but we are not; we are only Master and Miss Bentley. Standish is dropped, because the property was sold, and Cuthbert doesn’t want it to be bought back.’

‘Well, it doesn’t spoil you, whatever you are. You are just as nice whether as Mrs Manning’s wards or Lord Bentley’s.’

‘Oh,’ cried Jessica quickly and decidedly, ‘we are still Mrs Manning’s wards.’

THE END

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